



A KILLMASTER SPY CHILLER

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NICK CARTER

"THE MASTER SPY" —N. Y. JOURNAL AMERICAN

HANOI



**In the hot-spot capitol of North Vietnam,
Killmaster is caught in the mesh of a
deadly plan to dominate the world!**

Hanoi (1966)

(Book 15 in the Killmaster series)

Version 0.9

Dedicated to The Men of the Secret Services of the United States of
America

CHAPTER 1

MAN IN A GREEN BERET

Sergeant Ben Taggart of Special Forces Detachment Q-40 lay flat on his belly and held his breath. The feet of the guard passed inches away from his head and moved off into the North Vietnamese night. Taggart knew the pattern of the nightwatch; this was his third night on the job and he had learned almost as much about the Chinese patrols as he knew about the watch system of his own camp. But he did not know why there should be so many of them, or why they should be Chinese rather than Viets, or exactly what it was they were guarding with such vigilance.

In a minute and a half precisely the guard would be returning. Taggart waited for several carefully clocked seconds and then slithered across the path to his chosen listening post. It was a clump of bush that almost touched the tall, thick network of wire between him and the complex of heavily camouflaged buildings, and from it he could see the big Quonset hut that seemed to be the living quarters of some of the civilians.

He settled himself cautiously, making certain that he was not visible from either the path or the encampment and also that he did not touch the wire. A simple test on his first night of eavesdropping had told him that the current running through it had kick enough to kill an elephant. He crouched low beneath the leaves and peered into the compound.

The usual dim, bluish light pervaded it, showing the low, sturdy buildings as if in a flood of moonglow. It was not a military camp, even though there seemed to be enough armed men around to defend a fort. He watched a pair of them walk by slowly, feet moving in unison and Army rifles bayoneted, and wondered again what so many uniformed Chinese could be doing so close to Hanoi. They passed in silence. Behind him, the returning guard tramped slowly down the path. His footfalls receded.

Taggart pushed back his green beret and fitted a tiny device into his ear. It was radio operator Mick Mancini's own version of a very much more complex piece of equipment, and he called it the "Hearing Aid." Although its range was short it effectively amplified all sounds coming directly toward it.

For the third night in a row it began to pick up smatterings of conversation from the big hut. Taggart listened intently. In addition to

being Q-40's Intelligence Officer he was also its most versatile linguist. That was why Captain Marty Rogers had reluctantly agreed to let him do the snooping. Otherwise he would never have spared him for an assignment that had nothing to do with their own immediate mission, even though the camp was an enigma and the radio transmissions coming from it were so mysterious. Between the lot of them the men of Q-40 had been unable to break the code. But they had chipped it enough to be almost sure that the radio signals had nothing to do with troop movements or the Vietnamese Army or even the war.

Taggart turned his head a fraction of an inch to funnel the live sound into his ear. It came in the form of snatches of talk in many voices and in several languages. People of various races were talking sporadically and without much enthusiasm, as though they had little to say to each other. Sometimes their words were obscured in a muttered babble but more often they rose clearly and unchallenged, perhaps even ignored by people too bored to answer.

They were not, Taggart thought, a very chatty lot. But perhaps their trouble was that they were not good mixers. And one would have to be a good mixer to get along in this crowd. He gave all his attention to their idle talk, trivial though it was.

"... too long, far too long. And the food here, I say it is abominable."

"Ah, no, no, no, my friend! The table, it is delectable. Never have I myself eaten better. But you are right, it is too long. We need change, that is all... ."

French. Both of them. From different parts of France.

"Not yet, Hans, I must finish my letter. My wife, again she has not written...."

German. Very guttural. Sour with displeasure.

"What are you doing with that book? Can't you see I'm reading that? Give it to me!"

"Ja, ja, I am sorry—"

"Bah!"

Two more Germans. One of them very touchy.

"Yes, well, but does anybody know for certain how much money we are going to get out of this? Promises do not pay expenses, is it not so?"

A Swede, probably, although he was talking in German. The reply was indistinguishable, which was a pity, because the topic was more interesting than most.

Taggart manipulated a tiny dial and lost the Swede altogether. Instead he picked up a Chinese talking in slow, careful English, saying:

"I am going to bed. Good. Night. Gentlemen."

Good. Night. To you, thought Taggart.

Another voice broke in, loud and clear. Hungarian, Taggart recognized, but he did not speak the language.

"But it is in the interests of science, Ladislas!" a deep bass boomed. "It is many years since I have had such an opportunity, I can tell you." German, again.

"It is also in the interests of a cash reward, my dear Bruno. Naturally one is absorbed in the scientific aspects, but one also wonders when we will be paid and when it will be over. ..."

The voices faded as if the two men had turned away. Taggart's Hearing Aid tried following them and found nothing but a steady snore.

Then another voice:

"You should see how the others live! Oh, it is not too bad for us, I will admit, but Krutch and Wiesner and some of the others are living like kings. Champagne, pheasant, women, feather beds—"

"Oh, enough, Ludwig! We know it, we all know it, we've known it for months. What if it is true? Always the executives ..."

Again the voices faded; again they had been German.

Taggart was fascinated. He had learned more in these few minutes than he had during the whole of the two previous nights. And yet it still was not enough. He began counting German voices and wondering who Krutch and Wiesner might be.

Then his luck ran out. The desultory talk turned into stray comments on whose deal it was and whether it would rain again tomorrow.

He crouched in his cramped position for two hours, listening to the trivia and getting stiffer by the minute. Guards paced back and forth to either side of him at brief intervals, apparently oblivious to his presence. There, at least, his luck was still holding.

But there was no longer anything worth hearing.

It was time, he decided, to move on, to try to get a bead on the huge, low-slung building that looked like a giant workshop. It was not an easy target for the Hearing Aid because it was almost surrounded by smaller buildings that looked like storehouses, but maybe—just maybe—he could pick up something there.

He timed the guards, listened to their retreating footsteps, and began to edge his way out from cover. And then the Hearing Aid picked up the sound of voices coming from somewhere between the big Quonset and the workshop. It was the first time he had picked up voices from that direction, but it was also the first time anyone but the Chinese guards—and Taggart himself—had been outside the buildings at night, other than to cross the compound.

Taggart froze where he crouched. Three people were talking softly as they walked toward him from what he thought of as the officers'

quarters. Two men, and one woman. All German.

"... Krutch have to say this time?" A youngish male voice.

"Big news," said a full-throated baritone. "I wish he had let me make the arrangements myself, but we are after all working for him so I suppose we must be satisfied to let him do things his way. But the man will be here soon, within the week."

"Who is it, do you know?" The woman's voice, low and pleasant.

"A Doctor Burgdorf, Erich Burgdorf. I do not know him myself. Krutch apparently does not know him either. But he is the one selected by the group to bring the plans."

"What group, Krutch's?" The younger male voice.

"No, no, no, of course not, Helmut," the other man said with a touch of impatience. "Krutch, for all his pretensions, does not pretend to be a scientist. No, our own people selected him. He will be coming from Buenos Aires, where as you know they have been developing the triggering device."

"Well, the projectile is ready for him. When exactly is he coming?"

"As I said, within the week. It is impossible even for Krutch to give the exact date because of course one cannot fly direct from B.A. to Hanoi. He will have to take the same sort of indirect route that all of us did, and there are bound to be some delays. But it will not be long now."

"I am glad of that," the woman said. "Four months in this place is too much for me. It's like a concentration camp."

"Ilse, that is not a happy choice of simile," the older voice said gently. But it seemed to Taggart, listening, that there was something oddly menacing in his voice. "We don't say things like that."

"Of course not, Karl. I'm sorry," the woman said hastily. "A prison, perhaps I should have said. But call it anything you like, it is not a pleasant atmosphere either for a woman or a scientist."

The voices were loud now, so loud that Taggart almost felt like joining in the conversation and agreeing with her. He sneaked a cautious look through the leaves and saw them standing close to the concertina wire only a couple of yards within the outer fencing. In the blue light they all looked sick and pale, but he could see their faces clearly. And not only their faces. Taggart nearly whistled, and for a moment he had eyes only for the girl.

Like the men, she was wearing a bluish-white lab coat over whatever she was wearing underneath, but unlike the men she filled it out and gave it shape—exquisite, swelling, softly rounded shape—in all the right places. Taggart watched delightedly as she took a deep breath that raised her breasts provocatively and then lowered them again. He could almost feel them settling into his hands.

"And I've had about all that I can take of Krutch," she said.

“He’s not been pawing you, has he?” the younger man demanded sharply.

He’d better not have been, Taggart told himself silently. The girl shook her head.

“No, he’s got other things to paw,” she said, with a look of revulsion on her lovely face. And it was a lovely face, blue-tinted skin and all, and her lips were full and sweet yet firm. Or so Ben Taggart decided.

“Well, he’d better not touch you,” the young man said.

Taggart looked at him for the first time.

He was strikingly handsome in the Prussian manner, and Taggart loathed him on sight. That would be Helmut. He was looking at the girl in a possessive sort of way, the way that meant he had a claim on her. Or thought he had.

“He won’t,” said the girl.

“Hmm,” said the older man thoughtfully. He was very wise and distinguished looking, thought Taggart; quite benevolent. “Well, now, Ilse, if he should want you to have anything to do with him, I think it would be a good idea to cooperate. I must say I don’t altogether trust him myself, and it might just be politic to ... ah ... get on his good side.”

“His good side!” Helmut roared with laughter and slapped his lean thigh. “Which is that, the wooden leg or the other?”

“Tch, Helmut, don’t be crude,” the other man reproved Mm.

Crude, who’s crude? Taggart thought indignantly. What about you, you dirty old man, suggesting a thing like that to a girl like her? Come on, girl, tell the old bugger what you think of him!

The girl gazed at the older man and nodded slowly. “Maybe you’re right, Karl. Maybe you have something there. Yes, with the end of this business in sight, perhaps it would pay to be nice to him.”

Taggart was stunned. He watched them turn away and listened to their closing comments with a feeling of dreadful disappointment in his heart. Perhaps it would pay to be nice to him! What kind of a girl was she, anyway? Not only doesn’t she give the old man hell, she actually goes along with him. Bitch!

“But Dr. Wiesner,” Helmut was saying, sounding a little strained, “joking apart, you don’t seriously suggest that Ilse—uh—make up to that man?”

“No, no, no, no,” the older man said impatiently. “Let me put it this way. We must all be cordial and cooperative, and Use most of all. It won’t be for long, another week or two at most. We send the Spider up, activate her, we collect, and then we go. Ah, be careful now—here comes a guard. Let us talk of other things.”

They talked of other things until their voices faded out completely

and their figures disappeared from view.

Taggart stayed until all was silent in the camp but for the hum of a generator and the deliberate footfalls of the watch. Then he chose his time and snaked his way cautiously across the path to the bush-covered hillock that helped to conceal the camp so effectively from prying eyes. If it had not been for Mick Mancini's vigilance on the radio and his skillful use of the direction-finder, Q-40 might never have discovered the existence of this strange encampment. Unless, of course, they had stumbled on it by accident and blown their own mission all to hell.

Sergeant Taggart sorted the facts out in his mind as he wormed his war-toughened body through the low scrub on the far side of the hill. He had time for thought; the Special Forces camp was a good three miles away, across rough terrain that did not make for speed. Yet he felt the gnawing need to hurry. There was something big in the wind—big and nasty smelling.

And so he glided carefully through the night, thinking.

Fact Number One: She was absolutely gorgeous.

Fact Number Two: But she was a bitch.

Fact Number Three: This was no North Vietnamese camp and it had nothing directly to do with the war. Rather, it was some kind of scientific installation staffed mainly by German scientists and technicians and manned by Chinese soldiers.

Fact Number Four: They had developed some kind of missile which they were preparing to send up after receiving certain plans from a scientific courier arriving within the week from South America. And "within the week" could mean tomorrow.

Taggart wondered what sense Army Intelligence had been able to make of the taped radio transmissions and tried to quicken his pace. How could they know this thing would turn out to be top priority? And he was sure now that it was, that the radio signals and his own information were vitally important.

He flitted rapidly along the damp edge of a rice paddy.

Fact Number Five: She had lovely legs.

Fact Number Six: Whatever this was all about, it was not something that Unit Q-40 was equipped to handle on a moment's notice. They had their own job to do.

Fact Number Seven: Nevertheless, somebody had to handle it. But who?

Well, all he could do was report to Captain Rogers and have him run with the ball.

And run was the operative word. Instinct and training combined to tell him that there was no time to waste.

Ben Taggart picked his way silently past a sleeping North

Vietnamese village and almost into the arms of a patrol. There were four of them, heavily armed and wide awake, and they were blocking the only more or less direct route back to the Special Forces camp.

He stopped himself at the last possible second and slid into a stand of trees with a silent curse. The men were posted on the path and showed no sign of moving. That meant he would have to either wait them out or backtrack and take the long way around. He chewed it over in his mind and decided to take the long way, even though it meant a loss of several hours and a return to camp by daylight. From what he knew of Vietnamese patrols, it was the better bet.

Taggart backed away with silent care, damning the loss of time and praying that Q-40's field camp had not been discovered.

Crummy bastards, getting in my way, he swore; and began the long, slow trek through the heart of enemy territory toward the hidden American camp.

CHAPTER 2

TARGET: HANOI

“Within a week?” said AXE Agent N-3. “We may be too late already, considering that the week started— when, two days ago? Three days ago?”

Hawk nodded and puffed out a blue cloud of cigar smoke.

“Three days,” he said, his cold blue eyes flickering from one to the other of his half-dozen top operatives. “Taggart did his best, but he was delayed. And the code was a tough one to crack. We only received the transcriptions this morning. But we have one advantage—we know that the man Burgdorf has already left.”

“That’s an advantage?” Agent B-5’s lantern jaw chomped away vigorously at the inevitable stick of chewing gum. “I should think that would leave us right up the pole. Or do I take it that he’s already being followed?”

“You may,” said Hawk. “You may also take it that we lost him in Paris. We have had, as you no doubt realize, little time to get our operation under way.”

“Great.” B-5 chomped busily. “So where’s the advantage?”

“Pictures,” Hawk said crisply. “We know who to look for. As soon as Taggart’s information was passed on to us I was able to line up various agents—our own, C.I.A.’s, and others operating through COMSEC—to check passenger lists and major airports. A Dr. Enoch Berger left Buenos Aires by non-sked flight for Paris yesterday afternoon. A-2 was at the airport with a lapel camera and got Berger at Immigration. And then lost him. But he wire-serviced the pictures to us and we checked on Berger in Buenos Aires. It’s Burgdorf, all right.”

“And well on his way,” said N-3, stubbing out a cigarette on his desk ashtray. “I assume your idea is that we try to intercept him. But what if we don’t? Wouldn’t it be better for one or more of us to head straight for the camp and do our own scouting?”

Hawk eyed him coldly. “Wait for the rest of the briefing if you please, Carter. I know you consider these sessions a bore, but they are necessary. Unless you would like to go ahead without full possession of the facts?”

“Of course not, sir,” Nick said resignedly. The Old Man was not in one of his better moods.

“Very well, then,” said Hawk. “Now. I have sketched in the

background roughly so that you will all have some idea of what we face. There is more.” He stared across the newsroom of the Amalgamated Press and Wire Services at the hand-picked men of AXE, the secret organization he himself had founded years before. Some of these men had been pulled off other, longer-range jobs to take part in Operation Burgdorf. Nick Carter was one of them, and Hawk knew he was not pleased. But Carter would be needed on this present job—unless he failed during its initial stages.

“The radio signals,” Hawk went on. “Army Intelligence finally managed to break the code and after the whole thing had gone through the usual roundabout channels the messages were passed on to me. The gist is as follows, bearing out Taggart’s report: A projectile of some sort has been built at this camp near Hanoi. It is ready to be fired, and awaits only the arrival of Dr. Erich Burgdorf from South America, who is to bring with him the plans for a certain triggering device. The exact nature of the device is not revealed, but it apparently has nothing to do with the actual firing of the projectile. It would seem that its purpose is to trigger a secondary mechanism, quite possibly an explosive one. The man Burgdorf is to make his own way to Hanoi and contact what the signals refer to as ‘the usual party.’ Again, we have no idea who ‘the usual party’ might be. But we do know that he, she or it is waiting for Burgdorf in Hanoi. There is no fixed date for Burgdorf’s arrival, due to the uncertainties of travel in that area. The code name to be used is ‘Trig.’ And that is all we know about Burgdorf. You will see the pictures of him in a moment. Now.”

Hawk sucked at his cigar and sent its pungent fumes around the room. Nick shifted his long legs uncomfortably and thought of the girl he had left behind him in Madrid. She may or may not have been an undercover agent, but he had had no chance to find out. It was a pity; she had been well worth any man’s expert inquiry. Her legs alone were—

Hawk glared at him and coughed. “You may be wondering,” he went on, “why Special Forces Unit Q-40 could not continue with its own investigation. The point is that they are there on highly secret business of their own and are under express orders to do nothing that will endanger their own mission. It is only sheer luck—and of course their own expertise—that enabled them to pick up and pinpoint the signals. And it was on their own initiative that they taped the transmissions and recon-noitered the place. We can expect some further cooperation from them, but nothing that will give away their presence so close to Hanoi.”

He swung around in his swivel chair and waved a leathery hand.

“Q-7, the area slides.”

Six pairs of appreciative male eyes fixed themselves on Q-7’s

willow form. Hawk stared stonily ahead.

Q-7 rose and undulated toward the far wall of the news room, tugging discreetly at a skirt that would have been a little too short and tight on anyone less delectable. She stopped at a control panel and turned a demure smile on the nearest AXEmen. It was Nick, and he had chosen his position deliberately. He grinned back and winked.

"Not in working hours, Q-7," Hawk said distantly.

Ellie Harmon waggled her behind provocatively as she took her place on the high stool, flipped a pair of switches, and picked up a long pointer. The room lights dimmed and a section of the wall slid toward the ceiling to reveal a screen. A second's pause, and a highly enlarged photograph appeared upon the screen. The pointer stroked its way across the image and Q-7's dulcet tones wafted across the room.

"Electrified fence, ten feet high," she said seductively, as if pointing out a king-sized bed. "Concertina barbed wire beyond it, here. Both of them extend the full circumference of the encampment. There is one entrance, heavily guarded as you can see. These are apparently guard houses ..." the pointer slid across the screen, "... and these appear to be storerooms."

She paused and flicked another switch. The pointer moved again.

"This is the large Quonset hut believed by Sergeant Taggart to be the main living quarters. Here is what he thinks is the workshop ... and these are what he calls the officers' quarters. This one here may be a mess hall. But each building, whatever it is, is watched by at least two armed guards. The building that seems to be a workshop is more heavily guarded than most." The pointer lingered on two uniformed men and a switch clicked softly. Two faces sprang into startling close-up, grainy but distinguishable. They were hard, expressionless, and Chinese.

The scene changed. Nick frowned and stared at a structure something like a miniature Eiffel Tower draped in camouflage material.

"That is the radio tower," said Ellie. "It seems that they undress it before ... um ... putting it to work. And here is the long view, from the top of the hillock mentioned by Taggart." The screen reflected a clump of grainy blobs. "Unless you look very closely you can see nothing but trees. Here is the tower, here the fence, and here the workshop-type building. The camouflage begins just beyond this line of growth. Thus the camp extends from here to here ... and from here to here. We are told that, even if our reconnaissance planes were to spot it from the air, they would be altogether unable to make out the scope or nature of it. At night, the dim blue lights give away nothing to spotter craft. The place could be no more than a poorly lit hamlet

for all that shows from above.”

“But it is, as you can see, a whole lot more than a village,” Hawk cut in crisply. “Now the pictures of Berger-Burgdorf, Q-7, and without comment if you will.”

A picture of two men appeared upon the wall, one a uniformed Immigration official and the other a tall, lean figure in a business suit that had seen better days. A series of close-ups and profile shots followed, and then a long rear view of the full form of the man.

“Lights, please, Q-7,” said Hawk. “Gentlemen, in your folders you will find copies of all these pictures plus detailed first-person descriptions and the map coordinates for the camp. There is also a list of all the routes a man can take from Paris to Hanoi Thank you, Q-7. You may leave.”

Ellie slid the wall back into position with a flick of a dainty forefinger and swayed gracefully out of the room.

“Now,” said Hawk. “I have discussed this with State and Combined Security, and the consensus is that there is no way to infiltrate the camp. I am not always with the consensus, as you may know. But I do agree with them that we must stop Burgdorf from reaching the encampment. To that end we will cover all possible routes and intercept him. I don’t say try to intercept him. We must; we will. Any questions before I leave you to familiarize yourselves with the material?”

Nick resisted the temptation to shoot his hand eagerly into the air.

“Two,” he said, as businesslike as Hawk.

“Yes?”

“How did we manage to lose Burgdorf in Paris?”

“Taxi strike,” Hawk said succinctly. “He was picked up by a waiting car. Our man was not. A mistake. But it was a rush job.”

“Then if he was picked up he has friends in Europe as well as in South America and Hanoi,” said Nick. “Their organization seems to be enviable. He could have been driven anywhere in Europe—to a private airport, say, or any number of places that we can’t possibly cover.”

“True,” said Hawk, eying him beadily. “Your second question?”

“After Burgdorf is intercepted—I don’t say if he is, I say after—do you, sir, feel there is some way of infiltrating the camp?”

The corners of Hawk’s eyes crinkled. “Time will tell,” he said blandly. “Or perhaps Burgdorf will. At the present moment I must agree with COMSEC that nothing short of a pitched battle will give us entry, and we can hardly engage in open attack until we know what they are up to. So we shall have to wait until we have Burgdorf. Won’t we? Are there any more questions? No? Then read your dossiers—and quickly, if you please—and formulate your plans of action. Bring them

to me as soon as you are ready. Remember that all the resources of AXE will be at your disposal. But we have no department that manufactures time.”

He rose abruptly and stalked into his private office, his mind already switched to another of the dozens of cases that filled his every waking hour.

The men of AXE read silently, digesting every detail of their dossiers. One after the other they got up and went separately into Hawk's office, spent a few minutes with their chief, and went their various ways. Nick, for once, was the last to leave the newsroom. It took a little time to dip into his memory and dredge up every relevant fact about Hanoi and everyone he knew there, even though his acquaintances in North Vietnam were few. There was also the business of transportation to be considered, and the question of liaison with U.S. personnel in Saigon and elsewhere in Vietnam. Names, descriptions, topographic details, statistics, emerged from their mental slots and formed a pattern in his thoughts.

A faint grin began to curve the corners of his mouth. There was someone in Hanoi with whom he had an ancient score to settle. Maybe he could be useful ... if all other things fell into place. Maybe ... maybe ... maybe.

At last Nick got up decisively and strode into the old man's workmanlike headquarters.

Hawk looked up from a pile of papers and gave him a frosty stare.

“You've taken your time, Carter,” he said coldly. “All the likely routes are already well on their way to being covered—from the European capitals to Burma, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. There's not much left for you.”

Nick planted his hands on the edge of Hawk's vast desk and looked down at his chief. His right eyebrow rose in a questioning arc.

“Axe you satisfied with the plans for covering the routes?” he asked. Few other AXEmen would have put the question quite so bluntly, but a man with the title of Killmaster had no need to mince words even with Hawk.

Hawk bit off the end of a fresh cigar and stared at it.

“How could I be?” he said. “You pointed out yourself that there are private airports, and therefore routes, that we cannot possibly cover. Our only hope is to pick up his trail at a major airport somewhere along the way. And as you very well know, we'd need an army of men to do that efficiently.”

“Saigon's covered?”

“Of course. Better than most. But he must realize that his chances of getting from there to Hanoi are practically nil.”

Nick nodded. “There are better ways. Europe to India, India to

China, airdrop over North Vietnam. Or no airdrop. Coming from China, let's say in a Chinese Army plane, he could land at Hanoi airport bold as brass and make his contact with the 'usual party' in his own sweet time."

"True. So what do you suggest?"

"That the place to watch is Hanoi airport."

Hawk gazed quizzically at Nick. "Inspirational," he said drily. "Who will watch it?"

"I will. That is, if you get me there."

"Ah. I knew there'd be a catch. No doubt we could infiltrate you eventually—but 'eventually' is no use to us." Hawk held a match to his cigar and sucked energetically.

"What about Detachment Q-40?" Nick suggested. "They're almost on the spot. If I were to be dropped with them—"

"Absolutely not." Hawk shook his head emphatically. "That's out for several days at least. Right now they're in the most crucial phase of their operations in the Hanoi-Haiphong area and your arrival at this stage could jeopardize their whole mission. And even if that were not the case, we can't make immediate contact with them. Radio transmissions are severely restricted because of their position. It could take as much as a day or two even to get through to them."

"But we can get through at once to Special Forces Headquarters, right?" said Nick.

"Certainly, we have what amounts to a hot line. So?"

"So let's use them to get me to Hanoi," said Nick. "I can start for Saigon right away while you set up a ride for me from there. I'll need some special equipment, of course."

Hawk squinted at him through narrowed lids.

"What exactly do you have in mind?"

Nick told him.

Hawk listened.

"Not the Gulf," he said after a while. "Pentagon directive. Anyway, it's not close enough to your target."

"But—"

"Orders. Find some other way."

Nick's alternative suggestion was ready. It was actually his first choice, but he thought he would have a better chance to present it as a last resort.

"Impossible," said Hawk.

Nick shrugged. "It seems to be the only way."

"Even supposing Special Forces will agree to it, what makes you think they have a pilot qualified for such a specialized job?"

"I know they have. Tom Regan for one. If he's not available, Bill Stafford. Or Obie Opotowski. Or—"

"All right, all right." Hawk swiveled to the black telephone beside his desk. "Go to Editing and get your gear. I'll have word for you by the time you're ready."

Nick left, on the double. Time was ticking away, and he had much to do in both Editing and Documents. So much that Hawk called him in before everything was ready.

"All set," Hawk announced. "They don't like it much, but they're giving us Tom Regan. You ready?"

"Not quite. Traegar's still working on the papers."

"He can come with us and finish them on the plane. I'll tell him." Hawk punched a button on his desk control panel and spoke briefly. When he had finished he jabbed a second button and said: "Carter's gear at Exit B. Confirm departure plans with Section Two."

He pushed his chair back and rose. "Let's go."

Nick raised his eyebrows. "You're coming?" Hawk seldom traveled anywhere except between his New York and Washington offices and his Georgetown home.

"As far as Saigon. Any objections?"

Nick inclined his head graciously. "Delighted," he murmured.

New York and Washington lay far behind. Saigon slept uneasily many miles to the south. The small but rugged, unmarked plane banked left and right far above the river, flying a high, tactical course to foil the enemy's radar. Nick sat in the cockpit behind Tom Regan and stared down into the unfriendly blackness.

Sixteen thousand feet below, beneath the blanket of darkness, the Red River wound its way toward Hanoi. It was a narrow, treacherous target, winding capriciously through the heart of enemy territory, and there were no helpful flares along its banks to mark the drop zone. And yet it was the drop zone—one small section of it, deep by nature and swollen by the seasonal rains.

Nick lit his last cigarette of the night and dourly considered the prospect of dropping into eight inches of water and ten feet of mud. His own memory and the Statistics Department assured him that there was enough depth for a successful wet drop, but he could not help thinking of what it would be like if they were wrong. There was also the possibility, and a very likely one, of missing the ribbon of water by yards and landing in no water at all.

The plane banked again and turned south, back in the direction of Saigon.

"We're dead-on, Carter," Tom Regan called. "You have four minutes. Time to get back to Sarge!"

Nick doused his cigarette, gave Regan a parting pat on the back, and went into the cabin.

Sergeant Brenner waited at the door, earphones at his head. The air rushed past in a whistling blast.

“Good night for a drop,” he said cheerfully. “Glad it isn’t me. You got everything checked out?”

Nick nodded and hitched his scuba equipment experimentally.

“Mouthpiece and all,” he said, peering through the open door.

“Okay, stand by. Three minutes.”

He waited. Two minutes. Brenner kept his eye on the red light and his ears to the phones. The light turned green. One minute.

“Thirty seconds!”

Nick braced himself.

“Lots of luck, pal. Down you go!”

He felt a hearty slap on his rear and plunged out into the roaring air, tight-bodied, plummeting down through the darkness toward the thin, invisible line that was the river.

CHAPTER 3

THEY MADE A NEW MAN OUT OF HIM

It was like falling into a black and bottomless pit. For all he could see of it the earth could be five miles away or fifty feet and rushing murderously toward him.

Nick hurtled through the damp, warm air, his face distorted by its onrush and his eyes trying to pierce through the darkness below. There was a fringe of light in the east that seemed to be rising to meet him at eye-level, but below him there was nothing.

He counted. The faint drone of the plane became even fainter and disappeared completely. At that height it would neither have been seen nor heard by spotters. And in that darkness not even the most alert of watchers would be able to see the plummeting man in the sleek black suit with the dark-painted contraptions on his back.

Nick pulled the cord. There was one sickening moment, the same moment he lived through on every jump he made, when he was sure that the chute wasn't going to open. Then it did.

It billowed above him, midnight blue and almost invisible, a great presence that moved as if with a life of its own. For an instant he felt as though he were being jerked upward into the sky, and then he floated almost lazily down toward the nothingness that might or might not be the Red River.

Even though he drifted like a leaf in the wind he felt heavy, encumbered by the air tank and the equipment pack. Again he peered down, searching for his target and seeing nothing. It was a chancy drop, he knew, and right now it seemed like the worst mistake he'd made in his life. He and Tom Regan had plotted everything with utmost care, from river depth to wind velocity and drift, but even so he was dead without a lucky break.

Then he saw the dark woods rising up to meet him, and the thin, faintly-gleaming ribbon of the river too far to the right. He tugged at the ropes and thrust his body sideways. For one heart-stopping second he was sure he would not make it, and then his feet cleared scrub by inches and streaked a splashing path across the river. One hand went involuntarily to his face mask and the other clawed upward at the control rope. Then he was down and still plunging, knifing feet-first into the deep and muddy water.

He let himself go under and disengaged the parachute. It sank into the water behind him and spread itself over the river bed like some giant ray, and he was breathing through the air hose and paddling

deep beneath the river surface to his next objective.

As he swam he glanced at the radium dial of his underwater watch. That would also have to be jettisoned in a while, but not just yet. Twenty minutes of swimming, he calculated, and he would be where he needed to be for his next move.

Erich Burgdorf had not been picked up in Paris or anywhere else. He could already be in Hanoi. Perhaps he was already at the camp. But Hawk would even now be making radio contact with Detachment Q-40, his first since the initial message had come through.

Nick paddled on, swift and smooth as a fish, through the murk of the Red River. Somewhere to the east it ran into the Gulf of Tonking, but not before it paused at the sprawling city of Hanoi.

He looked at his watch again and thought of the place he planned to emerge. It was a low, rustic bridge, its rickety foundations sunk into a sloping bank of rocks and scrub. The bridge itself was too unimportant to have been bombed, and he knew it was still standing. At last report it had been unguarded. He hoped the last report was still true.

Minutes passed. The river bed sloped upward beneath him and the water seemed less murky. It was getting much shallower, he realized, and thanked his lucky stars for a pilot like Tom Regan. Timing, everything, had been perfect. Now it was up to him.

Eighteen minutes. He edged over to the side of the river and dog-paddled cautiously upwards until his masked eyes rose above the surface of the water. The bridge was in sight, dimly outlined against the sky. Beyond it, about a mile and a half away, lay the city, dark in its nightly blackout but humming with the traffic that kept it so busy in the night hours and almost deserted during the day. It was two minutes to four now; the rush hour would be almost at its peak by five a.m. Hanoi was an early-rising city. That suited him fine. If his luck held he would make it with ease and melt into the throng.

He unharnessed his breathing equipment and paddled it out to the middle of the river, letting it sink gently to the bottom. Then he took a long breath and submerged for the last lap of his swim.

A little less than two minutes later he emerged again, silently, and looked up at the bridge several yards away. And cursed.

It was guarded. There was a sentry at each end.

Nick trod water and looked around him. Neither river bank offered any cover for what he had to do. A path ran along one side of him and a well-traveled road along the other. Bicycle wheels whirled only feet away from him. It was all very well, he thought, to melt with the throng, but not in his present condition.

His best bet, maybe the only one, was still the bridge.

He breathed deeply and sank back so that little more than his eyes

were above water and watched the sentries. They seemed to be staring at each other across the bridge. Then, as he watched, they paced toward each other, met in the middle for a brief chat, and changed posts. Then again they planted themselves at either end of the bridge to gaze at the sky and pivot about to glance at the path and the roadway.

He gave them another few minutes to see if they would repeat the action. They did. He submerged completely and stroked silently toward them, his eyes straining through the murk for the bridge supports. They loomed up suddenly and he rose between them, reaching underwater for a jutting rock and pulling himself quietly onto the bank. The sloping end of the rustic bridge was like a roof over his head. Boards creaked above him as he squatted down on the rocks into which the supports were cemented, and he glanced up. The dimmest of morning light was beginning to steal into the sky, and he could see between the rickety boards. A sentry's feet stood squarely above him.

Nick grinned to himself as he slung the waterproof equipment pack from his back. He rather liked the idea of using the enemy itself for cover.

Working quickly and silently he zipped himself out of his fly-diving suit and thrust it into the bushes behind him. Watch, fins and belt slid noiselessly into the water. Nick opened the pack and took out the contents, a simple enough operation because they were all contained in a shabby though capacious reed basket. From it he took first the thong sandals that matched the pajama-like peasant's rags he had been using as underwear and slid them over his bare feet. Then the coolie hat, which he put aside for the moment, and then the bag in which he carried his extra faces.

He had practiced on the plane to Saigon while Traeger had been completing his papers and now he could do it blind. His hands worked quickly, rubbing the dye into all that showed of his skin, pinching the corners of his eyes with minute pieces of invisible plaster, patching the thin gray bristle over his chin, dusting his thick dark hair with silver, lining his face with waxen wrinkles that would defy all but the closest scrutiny.

Above him, the sentries' feet tramped back and forth.

Traffic hummed on the road behind him, beyond the shelter of the bridge supports.

Now for the teeth. He worked on them. The yellowing should last for about two hours, and that would have to be enough. Any longer, in fact, might be too long.

Nick clamped the coolie hat on his head and hunched his shoulders experimentally. Anyone seeing him might have wondered what a

wrinkled old Vietnamese peasant was doing under the bridge at that hour of the morning, but they would never have taken him for anything else. Tran Van Duong, alias Killmaster, was almost ready for his visit to the city. Nick was a little tall and full-bodied for the role, but a hunch and a shuffle and a deceptive way of holding his body had done the trick for him before. No reason why it shouldn't work again.

He ditched the waterproof pack and carefully rearranged the contents of his shabby reed basket, setting aside a nauseating bundle of bloodied rags for future reference. When he had finished repacking, the things that he really needed were seemed in the bottom of the basket and they were covered by a layer of such items as a businesslike peasant might carry—crudely woven cloth for sale at the markets, bags of raw opium from the hinterland poppy fields, and other good reasons for entering a city with insatiable needs. Then he reached under his tattered pajama shirt and attached the bloodied rags to his chest, winding the bandages around until they held firm. Nick sniffed at them in the early morning air and felt certain that no one would care to inspect them closely. They smelled of suppuration, infection, filth. He knew that their scent had been manufactured in a laboratory, but no one else could know. It would take a strong-nosed man indeed to inspect the wound beneath them and discover there was no wound at all. Anyway, Nick had no intention of letting anyone get that close to him. He had other things to hide, among them a Luger known as Wilhelmina, a stiletto named Hugo, and a gas bomb called Pierre.

He glanced up and down the river and over at the roadway, still in gray darkness but alive with movement. The river widened out almost immediately to become the mile-wide waterway leading to the city. From his perch he could see the big main bridge, solid with watchtowers and sandbags and men on guard.

The little bridge above him creaked to the footfalls of the sentries. Nick heard them meet in the middle and emerged quietly from his hiding place, his eyes darting from bridge to roadway for any sign of undue interest. The sentries were still together in the middle of the bridge. A bicycle passed him, then a truck.

Nick raised himself from his crouch, adjusted the long strap of the reed basket over his shoulder, and climbed onto the roadway with a sleepy yawn. Still rubbing his eyes and snuffling like an old man too soon awakened, he turned his steps toward Hanoi and shuffled on without a backward glance. He could hear the sentries pacing stiffly on the bridge behind him and coming to a stop at their appointed places. There was no outcry, no challenge.

He plodded along the side of the road for several hundred yards

before pausing as if to rest. When he turned his head he saw nothing but the normal pre-rush hour traffic—trucks, bicycles, carts, pedestrians dressed very much like himself.

A buffalo cart moved slowly alongside him and pulled up. Nick eyed it suspiciously and scratched his armpit, ready for instant retaliation if it should be necessary.

“Hola, old man,” the driver said in Vietnamese. “I go to the market place. Ride with me, if you wish. I see that you are weary.”

Nick creaked out a tired, grateful reply and clambered clumsily into the back of the cart. There was a gentle courtesy about the average Vietnamese that had not changed throughout the years of war, and he recognized sincerity when he met it. He settled himself among the sacks of vegetables and rice as the old cart lumbered forward.

The driver started singing tunelessly to himself. The cart groaned and muttered with age. Nick listened to the creaky symphony and made a rapid calculation. Hawk just might have word for him by now, and now was as good a time as any to find out.

He reached into his shirt, stripped back a flap of smelly bandage, and manipulated two miniature controls. The small sound that he made was inaudible through the louder sounds made by the cart and the other road traffic, and so was the reply that came through minutes later. He alone caught the answering signal and translated it simultaneously into words. It said:

Q-40 intercepted incoming message saying Burgdorf on his way. No indication given of arrival time but message reiterates earlier information that he is making his own way to Hanoi where he will contact the usual party, still unnamed. Q-40 has encampment under watch. No sign of any arrivals or departures. Reports from all other sectors negative. Send progress report as soon as possible. Over.

Nick replaced the flap of tattered dressing and settled back against the rice sacks. At least he was still ahead of Burgdorf. That was something. Now all he, Carter, had to do, was hide himself in Hanoi, meet the right incoming plane, pick up Burgdorf, prevent him from making contact with “the usual party,” and smuggle him out of Hanoi. In fact, all he had to do was the impossible.

The cart jogged on to the fringes of the city and turned into the main street leading to the market. Suddenly it came to a creaking stop. Nick muttered irritably and turned his aged head.

“Your business?” he heard, and saw a Vietnamese officer staring arrogantly at the driver of the cart.

“You can see my business,” the driver said calmly. “I am taking my goods to the market.”

“Ah, to the market. You expect a good price?” “How should I

know? I hope for one.” The officer scowled. “So that you will grow fat off the land while we fight for you, is that it? Well, there is a fee for entering. Give it to me.”

Nick heard the driver sigh and saw him reach into his pocket. “Fee, you call it,” the driver growled. “Take it, then, and may it line your pockets well.”

“That is not enough.”

“I have not been to the market yet. That is all I have.”

“So. What of the old one in the back?” The officer jerked his head in Nick’s direction.

The driver shrugged. “I do not know. Ask him.”

“Why do you not know?”

“Because he is my passenger, not my brother. I picked him up along the road. I could see that he was weary.”

“How very kind of you,” the officer sneered, and strode to the back of the cart

“You, old man!”

Nick sat up in confusion, the very picture of a nervous old man caught napping.

“What—what, what?” he stammered.

“Where are you from and what is your business?”

“I come from Hai Dong, sir,” Nick whined. “A long, weary way, with much walking, but people have been kind, sometimes they have given me rides—”

“Your business!” The officer swung out a thick hand and shook him roughly. “Fah, you stink!”

“As to stink, sir, I am sorry. My business is, I come to sell the poppy seed in town.”

“Oh, the poppy seed.” The officer’s eyes narrowed. “There is much money in the poppy. Do you pay your taxes on it?”

“Oh, of course, sir, taxes on every little seed.”

“Ha, but naturally, on every little seed.” The officer laughed unpleasandy. “Let me see that basket.”

Nick unhitched it clumsily and gave it to the man, hoping the fellow would not dig thoroughly enough to discover the hidden bottom layer and bracing himself in case he did.

The officer stuck in his hand and probed.

“Poor cloth,” he announced gratuitously. “Coarse weave. You will never sell that, you old fool. Ah. This perhaps you might sell.” He pulled out a small, sweet-smelling bag with the air of a conjurer. “Or perhaps you might not.” He thrust it into his pocket and smiled crookedly at Nick.

“I will spare you the usual fee and take this instead,” he said generously. “Although you are very foolish to carry so much of it

around with you at one time. Someone might rob you.” He grinned wolfishly and helped himself to another bag. “Now they will rob you of less. Here!” He tossed the shabby old basket back at Nick and stepped away from the cart.

“Move along, you!” he yelled at the driver. “You are blocking the street. Go!”

A whip cracked softly and the cart rumbled on.

The officer addressed himself to the riders of an overloaded bicycle.

Nick watched him sourly and hoped that he would keep his spoils to himself or sell them to his fellow officers. It was good enough opium, though it still needed refining; but it contained an additive that defied refining and tended to discourage habitual use. In whatever form it was used it would cause an unbearable itch under the skin, deep within the bodily organs. He wished that he could watch the enjoyment it was bound to provide.

The driver of the buffalo cart turned to peer at him.

“Are you all right, old man?”

“I thank you, yes,” Nick croaked. “I do not often come to the city. I had not known they were like that.”

The driver shook his head sadly. “It is not like the old days,” he said. “There was always something of that among the petty officials, but never so bad as now. Still, they are not all like that.” He sighed heavily. “I go only a few meters more. Where shall I leave you?”

They were passing the first of the low-slung market buildings. Bicycles were thick in the streets, skimming past each other by inches in the blue light of early morning.

“Here, where we are,” said Nick, “if you will.”

The cart clattered to a stop and he heaved himself awkwardly over the side and shuffled around to the driver.

“I have nothing of true value to offer you, my friend,” he quavered. “Only crude opium and even cruder cloth. But you are welcome to whatever you wish.”

The driver’s wrinkled, old-young face smiled down at him.

“I have done nothing, old man,” he said, “and I want nothing in return. Good luck to you.” He flicked his whip lightly and the cart clattered slowly away. Nick raised his hand in a feeble salute and tottered away between the market buildings.

They were brisk with morning activity and no one paid any attention to this one man in 600,000 who looked so much like them and yet was nothing like them at all.

He spent the next hour shambling around the city, looking for remembered places and fixing the new sights in his mind. He was also hunting for a public latrine, one that might be used without

embarrassment by a shabby peasant and also by a man of a rather different sort.

When he found one he dawdled until he was alone and then he worked like lightning. Raw opium washed down the drain toward the Red River. Crude doth and an old basket were abandoned in a trash can, but not before the basket was taken apart to release its bottom layer. Old clothes, tidily bundled, followed the basket into the can.

Tran Van Duong's short, uncomfortable life was ended. Ahton Zavodna was being born in his place ... a circumstance that would have caused considerable surprise to the true owner of that name, if it had been called to his attention.

CHAPTER 4

CHECK, CHECKMATE, AND DOUBLE-CHECK

It was now well past six and the streets were jammed with slow-moving bicycle traffic and camouflaged buses. Here and there an occasional battered taxicab rested at a curb, waiting for the first rush to subside and the second to begin. Then they would pick up the only customers who could afford to ride with them; the few big businessmen, the occasional Russian technician, and the officials at the foreign missions whose working day began hours after the Vietnamese had started theirs.

Nick Carter, alias Czechoslovak diplomat Zavodna, emerged from the latrine and strolled toward the business heart of the city. It was a little early for him to be about, but not so early that he would attract undue attention. In any event, Anton Zavodna and his eccentricities were well known in Hanoi, and that was why Nick had chosen to be him. Zavodna was a spy and everybody knew it. Almost all the diplomats from the Iron Curtain countries were in Hanoi for one main reason, and that was to keep an eye on their Communist comrades from other countries. Most of them were bored with their assignment and spent much of their time drinking at the old Metropole, reading newspapers in their dingy offices, and wishing they were somewhere else. But Zavodna worked for his living. He was up with the morning sparrows and still up with the night owls, listening here, watching there, spying everywhere. Sometimes he spent days out of the city, inspecting bomb damage to the roads and bridges and conducting interviews with baffled peasants. Other times he spent days roaming about Hanoi, observing who did what with whom and reporting every little detail back to Prague. Some people made the mistake of laughing at him. He was funny in a way, with his inordinate zeal, his wispy moustache, puffy cheeks, baggy eyes and even baggier pants, but Nick had seen him in action and knew him to be a tough and clever agent. So clever in his way that Carter had once lost one round of an old battle to him. Zavodna's backstage manipulations could be extremely dangerous; indeed, had been. To Nick it was only poetic justice that Zavodna should unwittingly make himself useful.

And in case they should meet head-on, Nick could count on finding some weakness in Zavodna. It was his experience that men in the employ of a Red intelligence service always had at least one exploitable weakness.

Nick paused at a sidewalk stand and bought himself a slab of rice

pastry. His cheap Czech watch told him it was time he started work. It was possible that Burgdorf would be arriving in some other way than by plane, but it was hardly likely. It was also possible that he was already in Hanoi and busy making his contact, but that was even less of a likelihood. AXE had moved fast to get Nick here by the swiftest, most direct route.

He licked his fingers and brushed pastry crumbs from his moustache. The airline office was three blocks away and he had business there. Nick bent forward in Zavodna's stalking stride and headed for it. Streets and sidewalks were thick with people of all kinds. The vast majority were obviously Vietnamese, but there was a scattering of Chinese, Malayan, Indian and European faces. Even the European faces struck Nick as alien. They were from Middle or Eastern Europe, he was convinced, and he hadn't a doubt that any one of them would cheerfully sink a knife into his back if they were to discover who he was. It was not a comforting thought.

The downtown airline building was even drabber than he remembered it. He walked straight to the Arrivals board and skimmed it rapidly. Hanoi air traffic didn't amount to much these days and it took him only a moment to register the incoming flights for the next twenty-four hours. The first was due at nine forty-five and the last came in at eleven at night. It looked like a long day's wait at the airport, and maybe a blank one at that. Even a Zavodna would begin to look conspicuous if he spent a full day or two hanging around watching the planes come in.

Nick strode confidently to the central information booth and rapped on the counter. The Vietnamese official turned to him with a frown that quickly became a smile of recognition.

"Ah, Monsieur Zavodna! You are about early today. You do not plan to leave us, I hope?"

Nick's skin tingled slightly. He would have to run right into a fellow who knew Zavodna! Still, he had planned on using Zavodna's face for cover, and now was his chance to try it out.

He shook his head. He was holding his wallet in his hand, casually but suggestively, and he saw the man's eyes lingering on it.

"No, I only wish to meet someone, a colleague of mine," he said in heavily accented French. "But unfortunately when he wired he neglected to tell me exactly when he was arriving, and I am far too busy today to meet all planes. You understand?" He fingered his wallet idly.

The man's smile widened and he nodded. He understood, or thought he did.

"Naturally, I will do everything I can to help. You are sure that he arrives today?"

“Regrettably, no,” Nick said sadly. “One is so unsure of transportation these days.” He opened his wallet and let the man see the edges of the notes within. “I may have to approach you again tomorrow. But in the meantime I would be most grateful if you would check the passenger lists.”

“But of course. You are aware, though, of the small fee involved?” The eyes were sly, expectant

“Oh, yes,” Nick murmured, sliding forty Vietnamese dong from the wallet. “There is, I am sure, a larger fee if one wishes to see the lists for himself.”

“Somewhat larger,” the man admitted, eying the notes. “About that size, I would think.”

Nick kept his hand over the money. “Then let me see them,” he murmured persuasively.

The man reached under the counter and probed into several slots without taking his eyes off the money.

“From where is the man coming?” he asked.

Nick shrugged expressively.

“One starts in Europe, yes? But where one goes from there to reach here, who can say? I’m afraid I must see all the lists.” He slid another ten dong from his wallet, and this time he moved his hand away.

The notes seemed to melt into the fellow’s pocket.

“Look quickly, please,” the man said, flicking a furtive glance around and sliding a pile of papers across the counter.

Nick went through them rapidly, noting points of departure, times, names beginning with B; hunting for a name that looked remotely like a derivative of Erich Burgdorf or Enoch Berger.

And found—nothing.

The papers went back into their various slots. Nick chewed pensively at a dangling end of his moustache.

“I suppose I must come back tomorrow,” he said irritably. “Those are positively all the flights due in today?”

“Positively all,” the man said emphatically. “Oh, there is a freight plane due in from Peking by direct flight at half-past ten, but your ... colleague is hardly likely to be on that.” He smiled again.

“Hardly,” Nick agreed. But his pulse had quickened slightly. A Chinese freight plane would be perfect transport for Burgdorf. And then there was this smiling fellow’s slight but meaningful emphasis on the word ‘colleague.’ He knew Nick’s story was a fake. Nick’s story, or Zavodna’s? Nick stared at the man from under lowered brows and saw nothing but avarice in the fellow’s eyes. But he could not be sure.

“No, I am out of luck,” he said. “Unless the Chinese People’s Republic has started using twelve-passenger freighters, ha, ha!”

“Ha, ha,” the man chuckled dutifully. “I do not think they have.”

But his watchful eyes had flicked back to Nick's still open wallet. "There are several technicians on board to supervise the unloading," he said softly.

"So?" said Nick. "My associate does not unload airplanes." He made the slightest little move toward his wallet.

"You misunderstand me, Monsieur," the man said eagerly. "Forgive me if I seem forward, but one knows that Monsieur has affairs of much importance. If your colleague comes here on secret business—as would seem to be—he may have chosen secret means of getting here. And one knows that technicians are not always what they seem. For the smallest of additional fees, I could show you the list of personnel on the Chinese plane."

Nick hunched one shoulder resignedly. He was almost certain now that he was dealing with a typically corrupt petty official, a man who would give you the shirt off his back—if you paid him twice its value.

"It will tell me nothing, I am sure," he said disdainfully. "But I may as well see it as long as I am here."

Another twenty dongs slid across the counter and a short list was thrust into Nick's hand. He glanced at it casually, as if without real interest, and caught the brief list of names in that one quick look.

"Too bad." He shook his head and handed it back. "You will be here tomorrow?"

"Yes, Monsieur." The man nodded eagerly. "Perhaps you will then have better luck."

"I hope so." Nick pocketed what was left of his money. "You will of course be suitably rewarded for your further help. Well rewarded, if I am successful."

The man smiled hugely and bowed low. Nick was gone by the time he raised his greedy eyes.

Nick had plenty of time before the first of the planes arrived. He spent it well, breakfasting first at the old Metropole Hotel, now the dingy Thong Nhat, hiring a seedy car at an exorbitant price, making a number of purchases at the drab stores several blocks from the market place. Only once was he challenged by a uniformed patrolman, and when he produced his fake Zavodna papers he accepted the apologies graciously and went about his business.

It was not much of a ride to the airport and he was taking his time over a bitter cup of coffee at one of the last of the sidewalk cafes. The car was parked nearby, ready-loaded, and he had little to do at the moment but think.

He thought about Anton Zavodna of the Czechoslovak Mission and what he might be doing. If this thing dragged on for another day or two he might have to do something about Zavodna, or people would start seeing double and then begin to wonder. But he did not think it

would drag on for very long.

He thought about the official at the terminal and decided again that he was safe from that quarter. Sooner or later the man might decide to report him, but not until he was sure there were no more golden eggs forthcoming from this particular goose.

He thought about the Chinese plane and its personnel manifest. Four of the names, those of the crew members, had been Chinese. Of the three technicians, one was Chinese, one was Vietnamese, and one was Albanian.

The Albanian name was Enos Biry.

Enos Biry. Enoch Berger. Erich Burgdorf.

It was too good not to be true.

Nevertheless it might not be.

Nick finished his coffee. Time to go meet the 9:45, just in case Enos Biry was a plant or a coincidence.

He paid and rose, feeling almost smug with confidence that this morning would see Dr. Erich Burgdorf dropping into Carter's clutches like a ripe plum.

And then he suddenly felt the familiar prickling sensation at the nape of his neck that told him it was not going to be such an easy morning after all.

He was being watched. Not only watched, but tailed.

He glanced again at his Czech wristwatch and walked down the sidewalk at a moderate pace, as if he had business to attend to but no particular need to hurry. The prickling sensation stayed with him for the next two blocks.

Nick stopped on a corner to let a stream of bicycles go by. Other pedestrians stopped with him. He looked them over covertly. Not one of them gave off the current that was making him tingle; not one of them gave a good goddamn about him. But somebody did.

Somewhere up the street a signal changed and the flood of bicycles stopped abruptly. Nick stepped quickly into the street and crossed it at a jaywalker's angle, reaching the far curb in the center of the block and stopping at once to gaze at a poster denouncing the rabid-imperialist-American-aggressor. But the corners of his eyes were busy taking in another view.

People were still crossing the street behind him. One in particular caught his interest.

A tall man in an unstylish European suit reached the corner and appeared to be looking uncertainly at the street signs. Then he looked at his watch, shrugged, and stalked into the doorway of the nearest shop to stare, spellbound, into a window containing nothing more fascinating than secondhand machine parts.

Nick swore softly and walked on to the next corner. As he made his

turn he saw the man tear himself away from the window and stalk along the sidewalk after him, his droopy moustache thrust before him like the horns of some bedraggled bull. He picked up his own pace and headed for the old, Annamese section of the city. It would offer a little more privacy than the downtown business section for what he had to do.

The streets narrowed into quiet alleys that zigzagged haphazardly past homes that were little more than hovels, past sidewalk soup kitchens, past abandoned, empty stores. There were few people about, for most were either engaged in the war effort or had been evacuated from the town, and the quietness was almost eerie. He could hear the following footsteps quickening when his quickened, slowing as his slowed.

It took him a while to find what he wanted—a short, deserted alley open at both ends, with a space between the shacks halfway down its length. He hurried down the alley to take up his position, but once between the shacks he relaxed completely. So completely that he had fished a cigarette from a crumpled pack and had lit it by the time his follower came sidling down the alley on his trail. He kept the lighter in his hand and blew an insolent puff of smoke from his hiding place into the alley. The footsteps stopped abruptly, but not before the full figure of the stalking man stood squarely framed between the shacks, one hand in a bulging side-pocket.

“I would advise you not to move,” Nick said pleasantly. “I, too, am armed, and I have the advantage of you.” In one fluid, almost invisible movement he pressed a tiny trigger on the lighter and then dropped the lighter into his pocket. The man gave a quick gasp of surprise and clapped a hand to his neck.

Wilhelmina replaced the lighter in Nick’s hand.

“The horseflies in these slums are shocking, are they not?” Nick said sympathetically, gazing interestedly at the wispy moustache, puffy cheeks, baggy eyes, and even baggier pants in front of him.

“Your hand out of that pocket, if you please,” he said. “Both of them high in the air. So. Now kindly step in here with me—but not too close—and explain why you are following me. Because I do not like being followed.”

Anton Zavodna, well-known spy, gave Nick a look of outrage and astonishment. Anyone seeing the two of them together would have taken them for identical twins. The only apparent difference between them was the startled look of one of them and the mocking gaze of the other.

“Why I am following you!” Zavodna blurted. “You, whoever you are you, you deliberately make yourself up to look like me, and you want to know why I am following you!”

“What absolute nonsense,” Nick said airily. “Do you suppose you are entitled to the only moustache in Vietnam? Because other than that I can see no likeness between us. Come, you must have a better reason than that. Who are you, and what do you want with me?”

“You must be mad!” Zavodna said hotly. But his words were slightly slurred and a thin film of glaze was beginning to shade his eyes. “You are impersonating me, and I want to know why.”

“Ah, but I am asking the questions,” Nick said gently. “Perhaps it is you who are impersonating me.” He was beginning to enjoy himself. It was even more fun being Zavodna than he had thought it would be. “And why are you doing that, I should like to know?”

Zavodna’s knees were beginning to sag as the paralyzing dart from Nick’s lighter began to take effect.

“Now I know you are mad,” he gasped. “You will not get away with this, whatever you are doing. Everybody knows I am Anton Zavodna. My Mission will support me. You will suffer—”

“But I am afraid your Mission will not protect you,” Nick said sorrowfully. “You have become too obvious, Anton. Agents in the service of our country should not permit themselves to be so easily trapped. As you have been. CHECK is most displeased with you.” He made his face and voice harden and he saw Zavodna flinch. CHECK was the most secret of the various branches of the Czechoslovak Secret Police, devoted solely to keeping all members of the other branches on their toes. The consequences of their displeasure were notorious. Nick watched Zavodna turning pale and bending at the knees. He knew it was largely the drug, but not altogether. He felt fiendishly pleased.

Then, suddenly, he was struck by another thought. It was too much of a coincidence, but what if... ?

“And what about the plane you are supposed to meet?” he rapped. “Did you not intend to do your duty?”

Zavodna gulped. “I know nothing of any plane. Of course, my duty, I always do my duty, but plane—I don’t know what you are talking about.”

And his distorted face reflected his absolute sincerity.

Pity, in a way, thought Nick. However. “CHECK has tested you and found you wanting,” he said icily. Wilhelmina’s raised barrel was concentrated menace. Nick’s free hand dipped into an inner pocket and came out with a card that could have been anything but happened to be Zavodna’s fake identification. He thrust it in front of Zavodna’s bleary gaze and whipped it rapidly away.

“Special Agent 7Q4 of Section Z, CHECK,” said Agent N-3 of AXE. “You will come with me and answer a few simple questions regarding your derelictions of duty and your foolish behavior of the last few months.”

Zavodna shook his head and whimpered.

“Stand up like a man when I talk to you,” Nick barked. “What is the matter with you, crawling and whining in that nauseating manner?”

Zavodna struggled to rise. “I don’t know, I don’t know what is the matter,” he cried. “I have done nothing wrong. There is no reason for CHECK... .” His voice stopped abruptly as if a switch had been flipped and his body crumpled like a discarded sack.

Nick looked down at the pitiful figure, a little ashamed of himself but delighted nonetheless. The sneaky bastard was lucky to get off so lightly.

He dragged Zavodna deeper into the space between the shacks and stripped him of all papers. The money he left for anyone else who happened along while Zavodna lay there resting, which should be a period of at least twelve hours. On impulse he slid Hugo from his sheath and made two swift cuts at his victim’s face. The operation was bloodless; Nick scattered the moustache ends over the alley and watched the breeze lift them away. Then he helped himself to Zavodna’s gun and quietly left the alley.

One very old man and a mangy dog saw him depart. He nodded cheerfully at them both, was ignored, and went briskly along his way. Zavodna’s emptied gun went into one roadside pile of trash and the bullets into another.

He whistled happily to himself as he stalked back to his hired car. He had accomplished exactly nothing on Operation Burgdorf, but he felt as though he had been given a shot of adrenalin. The world was being good to him.

CHECK sure had something to check into now.

The car was an incredible rattletrap of a machine, camouflaged like a tank heading for front line action and half as easy to handle, but it got him to the airport before the 9:45 plane got in at 10:15. Nick watched the passengers alight, scrutinized them as they made their slow way through Immigration and Customs, saw no one who could possibly be Burgdorf. He watched them all anyway, and when he was doubly positive that he could not be mistaken, he settled down in the waiting room with his face in a Vietnamese newspaper and read all about the heroic-valiant-resistance of the Viet Cong.

The Chinese freight plane came in dead on time. He was watching for it from an observation area and he saw the seven men get off. Four in crew uniform, three in civilian clothes. For a moment they all stood around talking to someone apparently from the freight department, and then one man detached himself from the group and walked toward the Arrivals building.

He was the only European in the group and he obviously intended

to have nothing to do with the unloading. And he was tall.

But apart from that he was nothing like the man Nick was expecting.

CHAPTER 5

SURE, PAL, SURE, WE'RE IN FRIENDLY TERRITORY

Nick walked slowly down the ramp and back into the waiting room. Through its glass doors he could see the tall man stopping briefly at the Immigration Desk and then presenting his one bag to Customs.

They were friendly, but they took their time. Nick strolled closer to the glass doors and peered through them, his earlier exhilaration gone. He had been sure—too sure—that Burgdorf would be on the Chinese plane, and he had been wrong. Unless, of course, he was in one of the crates that were even now being unloaded. But why should Dr. Burgdorf take such elaborate precautions? Well, maybe he had his reasons. Perhaps he was afraid an AXEman might be waiting for him beyond the glass doors of the Customs area.

Nick sat down near the doors and watched the man with an angry scowl on Zavodna's borrowed face. For the first time it occurred to him that Burgdorf or his sponsors might indeed have arranged to smuggle the scientist-courier in by crate, direct to "the usual party." If that was the case, then Carter was up the creek and the whole damn thing was blown. He could imagine what Hawk would have to say.

He glared at the glass doors and suddenly caught his own reflection. And he saw a man in a rumpled suit, with dangling moustache ends and puffy cheeks and baggy eyes, unlike Nicholas J. H. Carter in every way but his height. Nick cursed himself for a short-sighted fool and watched the man from the Chinese plane close his bag and walk toward him. This man, unlike Dr. Erich Burgdorf, had heavy, bristly jowls, a lumpy nose, and a prominent paunch. But things like that were easily arranged.

Nick let him pass and watched him walk away. He was indeed as tall as Burgdorf, and the lines of his back as he walked were, without a shadow of a doubt, the lines of the back caught by A-2's camera at the Paris airport.

The man was heading for the taxi area. Nick rose swiftly and bypassed him to meet him at the exit.

They faced each other in the doorway. Nick's quick but expert scrutiny caught traces of make-up on the other's face. Careless, he thought.

"Dr. Enos Biry?" he asked politely in German.

The man with the blue jowls stared at him.

"If I am, what of it?" he said harshly. Nick thought he saw a trace

of fear in his eyes.

"If you are, I am instructed to ask if Anton Zavodna of the Czechoslovak Mission may present himself to Dr. Erich Burgdorf and deliver a one-word message from Krutch."

The eyes narrowed. "I was not expecting you. What is the message?"

Nick smiled. "I know I am not expected. There has been a necessary change of plan. But I am afraid you must identify yourself before I say more. Here are my papers, so that you will know who I am." He dug into his pocket and produced Zavodna's identity card and accreditation to the Czech Mission in Hanoi. "Now yours," Nick added.

The man produced a passport with the name and picture of Dr. Enos Birya.

Nick glanced at it. "Not enough," he said, and his voice was crisper now. "It is Burgdorf that we are interested in. And there is no more time to waste."

The man stood there like a rock. "First your one-word message. You must understand that I can say no more without it."

"Very well, then," Nick said gruffly. He looked around swiftly. There was no one within earshot. "The word is Trig.' And I have a further message of my own. It is not wise for us to dawdle here."

The man's expression changed, relaxed.

"I am Burgdorf and I have the plans for Krutch." He said it as if reciting a learned phrase. "You will take me to him?"

"That's what I'm here for," Nick lied. "My car's outside. Hurry, please." He propelled Burgdorf through the door and led him to the parking lot.

Burgdorf stared incredulously at the decrepit car.

"That is your car? Surely a man with the vast resources of Krutch can supply you with better than that."

"It would be a mistake," said Nick, "to be too obvious. Get in; it's safe." He slammed the door as Burgdorf sank down into the sagging front seat and walked around to the driver's side.

"You see," he said, as the ancient engine rattled into life, "there are few private cars on the roads these days and no new ones at all. We use what the rest of the people use so as not to call attention to ourselves."

"Oh," said Burgdorf. "But we are in friendly country." A question hung at the end of his words.

Nick turned the car toward the main gate and the guards.

"Ah, but there are spies about," he said darkly. "You are sure that all your papers are in order?"

"Of course they are," Burgdorf snapped. "I must insist on an

explanation of what this is all about. My instructions were to—" He stopped suddenly and gave Nick a slit-eyed look. "Suppose you tell me what my instructions were," he said craftily.

Nick sighed. Too bad Burgdorf had suddenly decided to get smart. "Dr. Burgdorf, your previous instructions are of no importance. There has been, as I have said, a change of plan."

He pulled up at the main gate and produced his papers for the guards. Burgdorf did the same.

The guards waved them through.

"Now," said Burgdorf, as they rattled over the main road toward the city, "suppose you tell me how you fit into all this and why the plans were changed."

"How I fit in? I should think that would be obvious," Nick said coldly. "As for the change in plan, it seems that you were careless and allowed yourself to be seen in Paris. For that, and other reasons which are for Krutch and not for me to explain, it was decided that it would be unwise for you to contact the usual party. Therefore I was sent to pick you up—before anyone else did."

Burgdorf caught his breath. "Seen? Followed? Gott! But how could anyone know?"

"That is for you to explain when you see Krutch," Nick said, even more coldly. "There has been a leak, clearly from the South American end, and he will want to know how it occurred."

"But I have not the faintest idea." Burgdorf looked baffled and worried. "I took every possible precaution—we all did. Why, I even changed papers, changed identity, though there was not the slightest reason to suppose there would be any interest in me. No, you must be wrong. If information has leaked out, it must have been from here."

Nick chuckled harshly. "That is hardly likely, doctor. If all your precautions were as amateurish as your disguise, it is no wonder that there has been a slip. Yes, you will have some talking to do when you see Krutch. No doubt you know what he is like when he is angry. And he is angry now."

"How could I know what he is like?" demanded Burgdorf, sweating slightly. "I don't know him. I don't know any of his people. I don't know you. I have nothing to do with any of this except to deliver the plans, and if anything is wrong it is not my fault."

So he did not know anything. Nick wondered if it was the truth.

"Well, I hope you at least have the plans in a secure place and not in that flimsy bag of yours," he said sourly.

Burgdorf flushed under his crude makeup.

"Of course I have. They are taped to my chest. There is nothing in my bag but personal things."

"Good. That, at least, is something."

Nick slowed and took a narrow turnoff at a right angle to the main road. Now that the sun was high overhead there was scarcely any traffic on the move. The city streets too, Nick knew, would be virtually deserted at this hour. The country lived by night, for its people knew that observation planes and bombers flew by day.

"Where is the place?" Burgdorf asked suddenly. "I see we have very little gasoline."

It was true; there was less than a quarter tank left. The owner had apologized profusely to Nick while accepting enough money to buy the old heap twice over, explaining that it was the last of his ration.

"We don't need much," said Nick. "You will see."

His attitude discouraged talk. Burgdorf lapsed into sullen silence.

Nick drove on through the eerily quiet countryside. Even the fields were almost deserted, for it was not yet planting season after the rains. It could still rain again, and heavily. Even now small clouds were gathering in the sky. He picked up speed, as much as the rattletrap could make.

Forty-five minutes later Burgdorf said, "I understood the place was close to Hanoi."

"It is indeed close," Nick agreed, "but it is necessary for us to take a roundabout route."

Ten minutes after that and about thirty-five miles from Hanoi the gas gauge registered empty. Nick checked his mental map and was pleased with what he saw. He slowed and looked for a place to leave the car.

Burgdorf stirred uneasily. "Are we nearly there?"

"We've done the first lap," Nick said reassuringly. Ahead of them a rutted dirt track angled away from the road and disappeared into the trees. The car sputtered warningly. Nick nursed it along for one final effort and guided it along the track until it was hidden from the road. He glanced around, satisfied with where they were, and turned off the engine.

"Just in time, too," Burgdorf noted sourly.

"These things are planned to the last detail," said Nick, and delved under the seat for his purchases of the morning. Burgdorf's eyes widened as he saw the secondhand bush shirts, the heavy boots, the machete-like knife.

"What is this, a camping trip?" he demanded.

Nick tossed him a shirt and a pair of boots.

"We have a little walking to do. You'll find these more comfortable. Oh, and you might remove the phony tummy. It could get in your way."

Burgdorf flushed and muttered something under his breath, but he got out of the car and took his jacket off. Nick transferred certain

articles from his own jacket to the pockets of his bush shirt and watched Burgdorf while he changed. So far as he could see his guest was unarmed. He wished that he could frisk him to be sure, but it seemed a tactless thing to do. An uncooperative Burgdorf could make life difficult.

He made his own change quickly and thrust his Zavodna castoffs into the tangle of weeds beneath the trees. Burgdorf, he saw, was still deflating the stomach that was part of his disguise and making no effort to conceal his irritation. No doubt he was going to be even more irritated as the day wore on.

Nick turned away from him and strolled into the woods. There was no way for Burgdorf to get away from him, even if he suddenly decided that he wanted to.

The little radio came out of its hiding place in Nick's baggy pants. He held it close to his ear and tapped out the special call signal on the delicate key. The answering signal came back quickly.

AXHQS. AXHQS. Come in N-3. Come in N-3.

Nick's message was almost as brief.

N-3 to AXHQS. Report success. Repeat success. Plan A at once. Repeat—Plan A at once.

It may have been his imagination, but he thought the electronic answer was jubilant.

Plan A at once! Roger! Over.

He tucked the radio back into his inner pants pocket and strolled back to Burgdorf.

"Where have you been?" Burgdorf demanded. He was dressed by now and looking slightly ridiculous.

"Answering the call of nature and looking for a place to hide your things," Nick said cheerfully.

"What do you mean, hide my things?"

Nick sighed sympathetically and reached into the car for Burgdorf's bag.

"I know you're not going to like this, but I'm sure you understood when you took on the job that it wasn't going to be all fun and games. We're not going to be able to take your bag along with us, so if there's anything you really need you'd better take it out. I can assure you that you'll find everything you need at camp. In the meantime I shall have to hide this some distance from the car. If for any reason we do not come back this way I promise you that everything will be replaced—bag, contents, everything."

Burgdorf's face had gradually become suffused with the color of boiling anger. Now it began to look a little mollified.

"I don't see why it all has to be so complicated," he said sullenly.

"Merely an added precaution because of the leak—which may or

may not be your fault," Nick said pointedly.

"Oh, very well, then!" Burgdorf snatched the bag from him and burrowed through it, removing a couple of items that looked so nonessential that they made Nick wonder, and throwing in his discarded jacket and shoes.

"That's the idea," Nick said approvingly, and snapped the bag shut. "I'll be back in a minute."

He padded off into the woods with the bag. As soon as he was out of Burgdorf's sight he set it down on the damp earth and went through it like a swarm of locusts, burrowing through clothes and ripping the bag to shreds with Hugo's icepick blade. He found absolutely nothing to interest him, but he had needed to make the search to satisfy himself that he had covered all the angles. It would be too bad if he snatched Burgdorf only to leave the plans lying around in the woods of North Vietnam.

He had finished his search and was thrusting the mutilated bag into the undergrowth when he heard the faint sound nearby, the soft scuffling of a foot on rotting leaves. Nick's hand flew to Wilhelmina's hidden holster as he whirled around to face the sound.

The movement froze. Burgdorf stood several yards away from him, half-hidden behind a tree. The man's face, now bare of its make-up, was hard as unyielding stone, and there was a small, lethal looking pistol in his hand.

The voice was as hard as the stony face.

"I wondered what was taking you so long," it said. "Now I know. Throw that gun down or I'll blow a hole in your gut."

Nick straightened up slowly. Wilhelmina was steady in his hand.

"That would be a mistake," he said softly. "It would leave you with far too much explaining to do—supposing you ever got out of here and found anyone to explain to. Why are you so concerned about your bag? What're you trying to hide—the real plans?"

"Trying to hide! What about you—?" Burgdorf began.

"I have my orders," Nick went on inexorably, watching the pistol. "Krutch expects us to be thorough. And if you ever find him, friend, your story about yourself had better be damn good and so had the plans, or he'll tear you apart with his own bare hands. Maybe he'll also think you're trying to save them for a higher bidder."

"Now just a moment," Burgdorf said. "I have every intention of delivering the plans, but I also have every right to be suspicious when you start ripping up my case."

"You have no such right" Nick said coldly. "It's too late for suspicion now. Make up your mind. Go ahead, shoot me. And then find your own way to the camp."

The pistol wavered slightly in a hesitant hand. It was enough. In

the one split second that it was clear of Burgdorf's body Wilhelmina spat and kicked it from his grip. Burgdorf gasped involuntarily and looked wildly around for the gun.

"Leave it there," said Nick. "We'll get along much better without it. Now let's get going."

"But what—?"

"For God's sake!" Nick snapped, his patience wearing thin. "Will you keep quiet and do as you're told?" He glowered angrily at Burgdorf. But he put Wilhelmina away. Burgdorf's relief was transparent. "Now follow me and keep that mouth shut," Nick said roughly. "Believe me, I'll be as glad as you when this is over."

Burgdorf followed him. And kept his mouth shut.

For the first half mile they headed back in the direction from which they had come. Then Nick turned and headed deeper into a countryside of grass-covered mounds that were almost hills, of tall ferns with groping tendrils, of taller trees with flat, enormous leaves. Now and then he slashed away with the machete. Once he stopped to let Burgdorf gather breath and ask another of his endless questions—"Are we nearly there?"

"Yes, nearly," Nick replied. "We're going to be met and given a ride."

Burgdorf brightened perceptibly and the pace quickened.

Nick looked up at the sky. It was slate-colored and unfriendly, but not yet ready to burst.

He led the way between two low, grassy knolls and through a grove of tall trees that he remembered well from the time before, that time when he had discovered the place and stored all its characteristics in his mind for future reference. Later he had transferred the information, complete with map coordinates, to AXE's microfilm files. And yesterday he had shared every detail of it with another man.

The grove of trees broke suddenly into a clearing, one that was unusual for its size and barrenness. Spiky grass and outcroppings of smooth rock were scattered over its surface, and only here and there did a tall tree rise from the deep soil to tower over the blankness.

Nick halted briefly and looked it over. Nothing had changed since the last time he had seen it. There was no movement, no sound but Burgdorf's heavy breathing. His eyes rested on the two trees that stood slightly apart from the others, separated from each other by several yards. It was not going to be easy. But it would have to work.

He looked at his watch. It was almost time.

"Last lap," he said to Burgdorf. "They'll meet us here. Come on."

He padded over to one of the tall trees and looked up into its branches. Burgdorf stood open-mouthed as Nick unbuttoned his bush

jacket to reveal an odd-looking pair of braces attached to his trouser top. They were crossed in front and their attachment was permanent, but Burgdorf could not know that.

"You've got them on backwards," he said helpfully. "And what are you doing, anyway?"

"You'll see."

Nick tugged at the waistband of his baggy trousers. A length of tough, braided nylon cord snaked out like a line from a fishing reel. Nick paid it out carefully and quickly went to work, ignoring Burgdorf's questions. When he was finished a long, sagging loop of wire hung between the two trees he had chosen, each end tied so that the knot would slip free at the proper moment. He checked the small but sturdy clamp on the wire to be sure it was correctly positioned for his purpose, and then he hauled a second length of cord from his jacket pocket.

"Over here." He beckoned to the gaping Burgdorf. "This may seem a little unorthodox to you, but don't worry about a thing. It'll soon be over. Here, take this end and tie it around you—not too tight, but make it firm."

"But what—?"

"Hear that?" Nick interrupted.

They both listened. It was the distant sound of the plane.

A look of dawning comprehension drifted over Burgdorf's face.

"For us," Nick said. "Start tying."

Without bothering to conceal what he was doing he took the tiny radio out and tapped out the directional signal. Burgdorf had trussed himself neatly by the time Nick was finished.

"Very good," Nick said approvingly. "One moment." He reached down under the back of his bush jacket and probed for the flat metal snap that formed an integral part of his trouser braces. His sure fingers sought the clamp on the sagging loop of wire and snapped it through the hook. It locked automatically, holding Nick firmly to the wire by the braces that were, in fact, a specially devised harness. He caught the free end of Burgdorfs rope and tied it once around his own body.

"Now squat," he ordered. "Down low, put your legs around me and your head on my shoulder. It's going to be a little intimate, I'm afraid, but I promise I won't try a thing. Hurry, now!"

The plane was a fast-growing speck in the glowering sky.

"Mein Gott!" said Burgdorf. "Do I have to—?"

"Yes, you do," Nick said firmly, pulling him down and roping him with lightning movements. "There, now. Keep those knees up around me and your chin tucked down. You're not afraid, are you?"

"Of course I am not," Burgdorf said, his voice slightly muffled. "I am a good German."

“Brave lad,” Nick murmured, sliding his hand into his top pocket and taking out the tube-shaped thing that looked like a thick fountain pen.

He looked at the sky, waiting.

Now! he told himself, and rapped the end of the tube sharply against the hard earth beside him. The top flew off and the magnesium flare ignited spontaneously, spewing a stream of flame-red smoke into the air.

The sound of the plane’s engines changed as the pilot throttled down low. It made one pass, banked, and came back toward them, cruising low and slow with a long cable dangling from the contraption under its belly.

Nick took a firm grip on Burgdorf. “Knees up, head down, and brace yourself,” he ordered.

The plane roared overhead. Nick saw the clamp on the end of the cable swinging low through the trees toward the strung-out wire.

Then it caught.

He felt his body jerk galvanically and he heard Burgdorf’s shocked grunt, and then they were high in the air and swinging over the treetops.

The plane gained altitude rapidly. Burgdorf clung to Nick like a terrified monkey. For long moments they soared through the air at the end of the lengthy cable with the wind clawing at their hair and the first of the raindrops spattering their bodies. Then, slowly, the cable shortened as a winch was turned, and they rose to meet the plane.

Beneath the comparative shelter of its body Burgdorf raised his head. His eyes were wide with fear as he peered at Nick through a cloud of smoke.

“Ach, Gott!” he gasped. “We are on fire!”

“It’s only a smoke screen,” said Nick, “in case of attack.”

He looked up into the open belly of the plane and saw a familiar figure.

“Attack?” said Burgdorf, panting heavily. “But I thought we were in—?”

“Friendly territory?” said Nick. “We are, we are.”

He released a hand and waved at the smiling round face beneath the green beret.

“You bet we are!” he said, in his own American accent. “Howdy, Sarge!”

“Greetings, buddy!” Sergeant Brenner yelled back. “Welcome aboard!”

Nick felt Burgdorf stiffen in his clutch, saw his eyes turn to stare at Brenner with his Special Forces cap and Yankee grin, saw them turn back again to him with a look of horror.

“No, no, no,” screamed Burgdorf. “No!”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Nick corrected soothingly. “But definitely yes. I’m sorry, Dad, but you’ve been had.”

CHAPTER 6

INTERLUDE IN SAIGON

“Very amusing, Carter,” Hawk said stiffly. “I’m glad you have been enjoying your assignment. I hope you will continue to do so.”

“Continue, sir?” Nick raised an inquiring eyebrow. He was back in Saigon with Burgdorf safely delivered, and he was thinking of the girl he’d left in Spain. “But what about the assignment in Madrid?”

“Pending,” said Hawk. “Unless you have altogether lost interest in the possibility of infiltrating the camp.” He sat back behind his borrowed desk and eyed his most valuable agent.

“I thought that was out,” said Nick. “Or does having Burgdorf change all that?”

“It might,” said Hawk. “We’ll have to hear what he has to say. Z-4 from Psycho Lab is having a word with him right now and we’re waiting for a report from a couple of government scientists, based on their preliminary view of the plans. Hummph! One-half taped to his chest and the other in a tube of shaving cream. Amateurish.” His lined face looked scornful. “Well, it’s our good luck. Let’s go and listen to him. Or shall I turn the assignment over to someone else? Perhaps you think your talents will be wasted in a bush camp.”

“Depends,” Nick said thoughtfully. “What did Taggart say that girl looked like?”

Hawk rose slowly from the desk and glared at him.

“You will find the description in Addendum C of the official report.” He paused. A sudden glint of amusement warmed his ice-blue eyes. “But for your immediate, unofficial information, Taggart is said to have described her to his colleagues—thus.” His bony hands jabbed into the air in a totally uncharacteristic gesture and quickly described a curved feminine form of incredible voluptuousness.

Nick’s eyebrows shot upward almost into his hair. This was a glimpse of a Hawk he had never seen before.

“He may have been exaggerating,” Hawk added, reaching for a cigar. The smile vanished from his face as quickly as it had come and the ice was back in his eyes. “Now. Do you or do you not want to hear the fellow’s story?”

Nick uncoiled his long length from the office chair.

“Madrid will be much more pleasant in the fall,” he said.

They left the barracks office and walked around the edge of the airfield to the camouflaged hangar that, at the moment, housed only

one plane. It was AXE's own, a special craft that accommodated less than half the usual number of jet passengers but provided facilities undreamed of by the average traveler.

Neither Hawk nor Nick were average travelers. They boarded the AXEcraft and walked past galley, sleeping quarters, passenger seats, and the offices that were miniatures of Editing and Documents at headquarters.

Traegar stuck his head through an open doorway.

"Sir. H'lo, Nick. Look better without the moustache. Made me want to pull the ends to see if you would clang. Sir, I've been through Burgdorf's papers. Not bad, but a touch amateurish. Report now?"

Hawk shook his head. "Not yet, Traegar. We'll see the man himself first."

"Right." Traegar bobbed his head and disappeared back into his office.

Hawk chomped on his unlit cigar and led the way to a long, narrow room midway down the plane. He and Nick sat down facing a small screen of one-way glass through which they could see the two men in the other half of the Interrogation Room, otherwise known as the Flying Psycho Lab. One was the rotund and jovial Z-4, dressed as if for a Saturday morning at home, and the other was Burgdorf, similarly clad. The room was small but pleasant, lit as if by sunlight and decorated like an indoor porch. Burgdorf sat comfortably on a well-cushioned cane reclining chair, thoroughly at ease but for the polygraph attachment and the bemused look in his eyes. He was talking, answering Z-4's friendly questions without hesitation, and the two voices filled the viewing room as if there had been no screen between.

They listened for a moment. Burgdorf was earnestly describing his recent trip to Paris. Z-4 purred with genial interest.

"Not sodium pentathol?" said Nick.

Hawk snorted. "Of course not, my boy. That's old hat these days. Now we have a truth serum worthy of the name."

"I notice we still use the lie-detector."

"Pays to double-check. Z-4 likes it that way." Hawk thumbed a switch at the base of the glass screen and inclined his head toward a tiny mike. "Z-4, progress report, please. Any transcripts yet?"

Z-4 looked up and nodded. "First batch is ready. We're doing a re-take. He's being very cooperative—with a little help from us." He reached up and touched a concealed switch on the wall near the screen. A slot opened in front of Hawk and a neat sheaf of papers slid out. Hawk handed them to Nick.

"Here, take a look while I check on those plans."

Nick flipped rapidly through the transcripts while Hawk thumbed

a second switch and spoke. Nick listened with half an ear while he read what Burgdorf had to say. It was interesting, but there were gaps.

"A-2?" he heard Hawk say. "Let me have Dr. Braun or Dr. Oppenheim. Ah, Dr. Braun. Any news?"

"Plans are as simple as they could be," a voice came back. "They are, as you said, for a triggering device to be built into the projectile. The device is to release a secondary capsule when the carrier reaches the hundred-mile level above the earth. That capsule, in turn, is to disintegrate thirty seconds later and release a quantity of tiny metal balls which are to orbit at right angles to the usual orbital path. But as to the nature of these metal balls, we have no idea. The information is not included in the plans."

"So," said Hawk. "Well, perhaps you and Dr. Oppenheim would care to join us in the viewing room. It may be that Burgdorf can tell us more."

"At once," Braun's voice came back.

Hawk clicked off the intercom switch. The voice of Burgdorf dominated the tiny room.

"... not the slightest idea how he intended to get me to the camp," it said. "That was not included in my briefing."

"Let me see that transcript," Hawk said. "Then perhaps you will take over some of the questioning and see if the answers are the same."

Nick nodded and gave him the transcript.

The door to the viewing room opened and two men came in to seat themselves in the remaining chairs. They were Doctors Braun and Oppenheim, both missile experts; one a specialist in space flight and telemetry, the other an authority on space weaponry. Their greetings were crisp and businesslike, but they eyed the scene beyond the screen with considerable interest.

"Go ahead, Carter," said Hawk.

Nick pressed the mike switch.

"Zeke," he said. "I'd like a little chat with him."

Z-4 looked up.

"He's your boy," he said cheerfully. "I'll stand by."

Nick chose his questions carefully. They were not quite the same as Zeke's, but they would cover some of the same ground and search out possible discrepancies.

"Dr. Burgdorf," he said, leaning into the mike, "are you an espionage agent for any power?"

Burgdorf stirred and looked around indignantly.

"Of course not!" he said hotly. "I am a scientist—I am dedicated to science. My work is my life!"

"For whom do you work?"

“For my fellow Germans,” Burgdorf said proudly. “For them and with them. We have an experimental laboratory outside 1 Buenos Aires where we do such things as the world has never dreamed of!”

“Oh, I’m sure of that,” Nick murmured. Zeke had already got some of the details, and no doubt he would get many more. But he himself wanted more immediate information.

“And who supports the group of scientists with whom you work?” he asked. “Not Germany? And surely not the Argentinians?”

Burgdorf’s dull eyes flickered and he looked uneasy. But he answered.

“The Chinese,” he said. “Sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Of late we have been receiving our instructions from a man named Krutch.”

“Do you know him? Or any of the people who are at present working with him?”

“No.”

“What is the nature of the place to which you were taking the plans for the triggering device?”

“A camp. Near Hanoi.”

“What kind of camp? Does it have anything to do with the army?”

“Of course not.” Burgdorf almost chuckled. “I said that I was a scientist, did I not? No, it is a work camp—a missile site, an assembly plant, call it what you want.”

“An assembly plant. Describe it, then. Don’t tell me you haven’t been there—just tell me what you know about it. What is being assembled there, how long it has been there, who is in charge, who is working there, exactly what they are doing. And start with the nature of the operation itself.”

“The nature of the operation? Why, to build a missile that is to be launched into space. For two years we have been working on this, in one part of the world and another ... Egypt, South America, Albania, other places. Mostly German scientists, of course. Those who are not—satisfied with the present scheme of things. Parts have been made here, there, everywhere. Now they are being assembled at the camp.”

“And how long has that been there?”

“Oh, six, seven months. It has taken a long time, but everything is ready now.”

“For the triggering device?”

“Yes.” Burgdorf looked smug. “That is the last of the parts and the most important one.”

“What does it do?”

“Naturally, it triggers a mechanism in the projectile, which releases a secondary device. A large cylindrical device containing a great many metal balls which are ejected upon the disintegration of the capsule

and spun into orbit.”

“And what do they do?”

Burgdorf cleared his throat and looked faintly abashed.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know!” Hawk said “Pah!” and Nick scowled through the one-way glass. “You’ve helped to develop the triggering device and you don’t know what it triggers?”

Burgdorf flushed angrily.

“I told you what it triggers. A mechanism—”

“Yes, you’ve said that. But what is the nature of the metal balls? What are they supposed to do?”

“They’re supposed to orbit—”

“All right, describe the triggering device. In detail.”

Nick turned to the scientists as Burgdorf began.

“Over to you, gentlemen,” he said. “Ask all the questions you like. Especially about the metal balls.”

Burgdorf talked. Braun and Oppenheim asked pointed questions. And got their answers. Nearly all of them.

At last Braun wiped his brow and said, “Everything he says about the triggering device checks out perfectly. But those metal balls ... it’s hopeless. He hasn’t given so much as a hint. I hate to think of what they might be. The implications are monstrous.”

“Purely experimental, possibly,” Oppenheim said in

his reedy voice. “But under the circumstances it seems doubtful.”

“Extremely,” said Hawk. “Burgdorf.” He leaned toward the mike. “For the last time, before we are obliged to take other measures with you—what is the purpose of those metal balls?” His voice ripped savagely through the tiny room.

Burgdorf flinched and looked wildly around for the source of the menacing voice.

“I don’t know,” he shouted. “I don’t know, I don’t know!”

“He doesn’t,” Z-4 said regretfully. “He really doesn’t know. And you only have time for a few more questions, sir. He’s coming out of it. We’ll try him again later, of course, but he’ll need retreatment first.”

“Very well,” said Hawk, his lined face expressionless. “Carter?”

Nick began again.

“Who is the usual party whom you were supposed to contact in Hanoi? And how were you to make your contact?”

Burgdorf took a deep breath. “I was to go to the hotel and phone the Chinese Embassy, ask for a man named Liu Chan, and arrange to meet him at the bar. Then I was to say, ‘I am Burgdorf and I have the plans for Krutch.’”

Hawk frowned. “Too simple,” he muttered. “What, about the next

step?"

Nick nodded and addressed himself to the mike. "And then? When you got to the camp, how were you supposed to identify yourself? There are people there, of course, who know you?"

Burgdorf shook his head. "No, how could they know me? We have been—my group has been—working separately from the others. My identification is the plans. Also the code name 'Trig,' which must be said to the code word 'Metaplast.'"

Nick's interest quickened. " 'Metaplast?' What does that mean?"

"I don't know." Burgdorf made a sudden move and stared suspiciously at the polygraph. Z-4 got up quickly.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said to his side of the screen. "That's all for now. Give me half an hour and then we'll try again." He touched a switch and the viewing glass became opaque.

Hawk clucked impatiently and rose.

"At least we have something to get started on, I suppose," he said grudgingly. "Dr. Braun—Carter here already has some knowledge of rocketry. And he is quick-minded, I am glad to say. How long do you think it will take you to brief him on triggering devices?"

It took hours of intensive effort. But while Nick studied, Burgdorf went on talking ... about his fellow German scientists who had moved from South America to Paris and about the box number through which he was to reach them when his job was done ... about their arrangements with Liu Chan of the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi, and the message that was to be sent to him in case anything went wrong. About the code words "Trig" and "Metaplast," and Burgdorf's complete ignorance of the meaning of the latter. About the various groups of scientists working in various parts of the world to contribute to the missile that would be blasted off from the encampment near Hanoi to—but he did not know what it was supposed to do. About himself; about his home, his life, his interests, about the people he knew and those he did not know, such as Liu Chan, Wiesner, Krutch, and others.

By the time Burgdorf was drained dry Nick had even more to study. And Burgdorf would be late in arriving at the encampment near Hanoi, but a message to Liu Chan from the AXE branch office in Paris should take care of that.

"They should have had the sense to send a thoroughly trained agent," Hawk said contemptuously, when the final briefing session ended. "Or at least he should have been conditioned so he wouldn't talk."

"Our good luck," said Nick. "I suppose they didn't think they needed any more than a scientific courier on this job—all he had to do

was make a simple delivery 'in friendly country.' If it hadn't been for Q-40 and their radiomen, Burgdorf would've been there by now."

They were walking together across the Special Forces airfield to the small, swift plane that was warming up to take Nick to the intermediate base south of the enemy border. From there he would be taken by U-10 to the Drop Zone several miles from Q-40's operating base.

"Anyway," Nick added, "this doesn't strike me as being essentially an espionage operation. Sabotage of some sort seems more likely."

Hawk shot him a beetle-browed look. "Sabotage on the orbital plane? Possibly. But farfetched, wouldn't you say?"

"Reaching rather high, perhaps," Nick agreed cheerfully. "But then, I'm accustomed to top-level operations."

Hawk snorted. "Curb your puns when you're with the Germans. I don't think they'll find you funny. I don't, myself. Now. Remember that Burgdorf said—and our own scientists agree—that the device is extremely simple and should take only three days to build. So, unless you can think of some way to stall them, you have very little time. And I don't, as a matter of fact, think that stalling is a good idea. We don't want to give Liu Chan and the Paris group too much opportunity to think things over. In and out fast, that's the idea, and if you can do it in less than three days so much the better."

"Oh, absolutely," said Nick, thinking of a girl with a lovely Nordic face and a figure that curved deliciously in all the right places.

"I wouldn't kid you," Sergeant Ben Taggart said, his voice pitched low for Nick's ears only. "Gorgeous, that's what she is. Legs! God, you should see the legs. You will, I guess. And the superstructure! Man, that body has everything. Face, too. Eyes, nose, mouth, all fabulous." He sighed yearningly. "But kind of a bitch, though," he added mournfully.

"Perhaps we're all misjudging her," Nick murmured. "How are we for time?"

Taggart checked his watch as they crept through the undergrowth.

"Dead on," he said. "We'll give him five, and then I'll signal. That gives half an hour for the search, fifteen minutes after that for you to stroll up to the place. We'll be there in plenty of time. You think you'll get away with it?"

"Why not? They're expecting Burgdorf, so I'll be there."

The long grass sighed softly as they stole through it along the route scouted earlier by Taggart. It was slightly to the west of the German-Chinese encampment, and two miles further west Sergeant Mick Mancini, communications expert, waited for Ben's signal. Late afternoon light filtered bleakly through the dripping trees.

Taggart peered around to check their position and looked again at his watch.

"Now," he said quietly, and touched a switch on his walkie-talkie. When he spoke his words were Vietnamese, but they were addressed to Mick Mancini and they were too brief to be decoded.

Mancini's one-word answer came without delay.

"Might as well make ourselves comfortable for a while," said Taggart, sitting down between the gnarled roots of a giant tree. "Nothing to do now but wait, watch and listen."

Nick sat down next to him, as casual as the man wearing the green beret but just as alert. He liked and admired these tough men of the Special Forces. They would give him the best support a man could have, he knew. Captain Rogers of Q-40 had met him at the Drop Zone with Ben Taggart and given him a rapid briefing.

"Sorry we can't do more just yet," he had finished. "But we're still up to our necks in our own operation. Wouldn't have done this at all if it hadn't been so important. But try to give us the full three days, will you?"

Nick had thought of Hawk's parting words, but he had promised. There was no sense getting into the place at all if he couldn't complete the job.

Now he sat and waited with Ben Taggart, listening.

The sound began as a distant hum and built slowly into a chuffing roar. Then it faded. For a moment it was gone altogether, and then it came back loud and clear, the chopping sound of a helicopter zigzagging across the dull sky overhead. Nick glanced up involuntarily. There was nothing to be seen. Again the sound grew soft and faded altogether.

"Nice," said Taggart approvingly. "Very nice. Mick has it down pat. I wish I could see the buggers looking for it!"

The sound came back, louder, clearer, increasingly insistent.

Nick nodded appreciatively. "Good weather for it, too. Just enough light to see the ground but gray enough to make 'copter spotting difficult. How do you fellows manage these things?"

Taggart grinned. "Oh, it's just a knack, I guess."

But it was more than a knack. It was a careful plotting of the weather patterns and a lot of gutty thinking. It was also a radioman called Mick Mancini with a loudspeaker high in a tree and a tape recorder beside him in his hiding place, filling the air with the sound of a helicopter that would never be seen because it didn't exist. A real one, so close to Hanoi, would have been too risky. But not to have one at all would have been to invite too many questions from those who were expecting Dr. Burgdorf.

The sound droned back and forth, fading and building, chuffing

and chopping. Then it seemed to hover like a triumphant mosquito. Rotor blades hacked the air in a rhythmic, coughing whine.

"Let's go," said Taggart. "You've landed."

He led the way around a low hillock to the edge of a small clearing. Here he stopped and took a long, slow look around.

"All clear," he said quietly. "You're on your own from here. Due east half a mile, and watch for guards. They may be trigger-happy. Lots of luck."

He slapped Nick lightly on the shoulder and disappeared into the undergrowth. Nick waited for the faint sounds of his departure to fade completely before he made a move. From somewhere near him came the illusory sound of a helicopter surging skyward with a growl of power. Apparently it had taken off and was heading back the way it had come.

Nick crossed the clearing and tramped through another belt of dripping greenery, walking with the care of one who is not quite sure of where to put his feet but making no attempt at secrecy. Twigs snapped, weeds rustled at his clumsy passage. At least no one could accuse him of sneaking up on them.

"Halt!" The harsh voice lashed his eardrums before he saw its owner. He froze where he was and half-raised his hands to show that they were empty. A uniformed figure stepped abruptly in front of him, jabbing a submachine gun menacingly toward his belly. Cold brown eyes in a pale yellow face raked over him, noting the close-cropped fair hair with the streaks of gray, the new boots, the new knapsack, the new khakis, the look of alarm.

"Don't shoot!" Nick said hastily in German. "I am friend, you understand? Friend of Chinese people. Friend," he repeated falteringly in Chinese. "I am Dr. Burgdorf, to see Krutch."

The cold Chinese eyes flickered over him contemptuously and the gun jabbed at his ribs.

"Up hands," the man said in fragmentary German. "You see Klutch. March!" The gun moved behind him to slap against his rear.

Nick marched. The gun prodded him onto a crude path.

It led suddenly into a very much wider path, almost a road, overhung with jungle foliage. At the end of it was a tall steel fence with a great metal gate, and beyond the gate there was a guardhouse in the forefront of a number of camouflaged buildings. There were four armed guards at the gate.

Nick's guide jabbed him roughly toward it. A smaller gate opened within the large one and he was thrust roughly inside to meet another menacing machine gun. The gate clanged shut behind him and suddenly he was ringed by Chinese guards, one prodding at him from the rear and another poking from the front and all of them gabbling

suspiciously.

"What is the meaning of this treatment?" Nick demanded in his loudest, most pompous German. "Does no one here expect me? Does no one here speak a civilized language? I am Burgdorf, I tell you, and I have the plans for Krutch. Take me to him at once!"

Two more figures stepped out of the guardhouse. One was an elderly man in a white coat. The other was an enormous, barrel-chested man with a shiny dome of a head and a flaming red beard. He moved quickly but with a sort of lumpish clumsiness. A vast voice bellowed out like a sonic boom.

"So, you are Burgdorf, are you? Guards! Back to your posts!"

The group of armed men scattered. The great figure lumped its way ponderously toward Nick and planted itself firmly in front of him. Little eyes looked down at him speculatively from beneath the shaggy red brows.

"I am Krutch," the big voice boomed. "Dr. Wiesner will check your credentials in a moment. But why is Liu Chan not here?"

"For security reasons he had to be bypassed," Nick said stiffly. "Anyway, I am the one who has the 'Trig,' not Liu Chan."

"Ah." The big eyebrows rose to meet the shiny skull. "Then you will be as interested to see the 'Metaplast' as we are to see the plans."

"I am indeed anxious to see the 'Metaplast,'" Nick said truthfully. "Indeed, the entire plant. But perhaps you would be good enough to show me to my quarters first. I have had a rather long and tiring journey—not through Hanoi, as planned, but through Laos and thence by helicopter. I shall tell you about it as soon as I have rested."

"The plans first," Dr. Wiesner's pleasant voice suggested.

"But of course, Doctor." Nick smiled a tired smile. "Not here, though, if you don't mind. I have one half taped to my chest and the other in a tube of shaving cream, and I'd rather not unpack and undress right here."

"Of course not, my dear fellow!" Krutch roared, and slapped Nick jovially on the back. "To your quarters first, and Wiesner will see you there. Then you shall rest, and then—we celebrate!"

He grasped Nick by the elbow and propelled him toward the building Taggart had described as the officers' quarters. Nick gazed around with unconcealed interest. The fence was very high and very strong. The inner ring of rolled barbed wire was thick and strategically placed. Armed guards with impassive Chinese faces were planted at the corners of each building and along the fence.

So now he was in.

He wondered if he would ever get out.

CHAPTER 7

COURTESIES OF THE HOUSE

“Drink up, drink up, my friends! In three days the Spider will be high above the earth, and that will be the end of all our labors. So drink, be merry, for tomorrow we start the last phase of our work!”

Krutch’s great voice rolled across the room like a gathering storm as he slapped his huge thigh enthusiastically and raised his glass on high.

“That’s all very well, Krutch,” a guttural voice called out, “but what about the money?”

Krutch froze where he stood and glowered like a thundercloud. His tiny eyes sought the owner of the voice and found him.

“Ah, it is you, Ludwig, the malcontent,” he growled. “The money is here, plenty of it. Each will be paid according to what he has done. There are millions to be shared among us. I, of course, will get the greater portion, because it is I who brought you here and I who have arranged everything. I, Ulric Krutch!” He thumped his chest, a great ape glorying in his power. “Ah Choy is here to see that I deal with you fairly. Is that not so, Ah Choy?” His little eyes turned a sly look upon the slender Chinese civilian who stood beside him.

Nick looked across the tables of the mess hall, gaily decorated for the occasion, and waited for Ah Choy to make a clever Chinese speech. He was disappointed.

“That is so, Mr. Krutch,” Ah Choy said flatly. And that was all.

“So drink!” roared Krutch, stomping toward a huge chair that seemed to have been built especially for him and flinging his huge bulk into it. “Burgdorf is here, the plans are here, and success will soon be ours.”

Two dozen pairs of male eyes turned toward Nick where he sat and two dozen arms raised their glasses to him. He raised his own in a Prussian salute, then drained it quickly. From the corner of his eye he noticed Dr. Wiesner, now standing beside Krutch, make a little motioning gesture.

Dr. Helmut Wulff rose from Nick’s table.

“Please excuse me,” he said graciously, and strolled away, a striking Apollo of a man. Nick turned to the girl beside him.

She was everything Taggart had said, and more. Her features were finely chiseled but her lips were full and her eyes were wide and lustrous. Blonde hair curled seductively at the nape of her neck and a

little valley snuggled provocatively beneath the low-cut front of her dress. And her body was a softly curving pillow such as men dream of lying upon.

"Does Krutch entertain often?" Nick asked, gazing at a small dimple in her cheek.

The dimple deepened as she smiled. Her teeth were like little niblets of white corn.

"No, this is his first party. It's all in your honor. I've never seen all these people together before, as a matter of fact." Her voice was low and vibrant, the kind of voice that made Nick feel warm inside. "Most of them are technicians who work in the main workshop. The rest of us are more or less confined to the computers or the test center. And as you saw this afternoon, the living quarters are quite separate. There's no good reason for it except Krutch's sense of hierarchy. Nothing's too good for the top people on his team."

Nick nodded. He had been astonished by the lavish-ness of the quarters assigned to him, and even that paled into insignificance beside the luxury Krutch had provided for himself.

"And what is your position in the hierarchy, Miss Wiesner, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

Her smile faded. "Not Miss Wiesner. The name is Benz. Doctor Ilse Benz. Karl Wiesner is my stepfather and—associate."

"I beg your pardon. I hadn't realized." And now that he had, he was delighted. As a fellow scientist he, too, would have an opportunity to associate with Dr. Ilse Benz, who was so much more attractive than her stepfather. "I shall call you Mercedes," he said, and grinned at her.

She sighed. "You don't think that's the first time I've heard that tired pun, do you?" But the dimple was returning.

"I'd hoped it was," said Nick. "I do my best. Tell me, what is your exact field, your specialty? Scientifically speaking, of course."

"Metaplast," she said matter of factly. "You know, you're younger than I thought you would be." Her lustrous blue eyes strayed thoughtfully over his face.

Oh. Metaplast. Even during his guided tour he hadn't been given so much as a hint as to what it might be. Krutch had waved a hand the size of a bunch of plantains at a sealed metal vault set into a concrete wall and said, "That's where Wiesner keeps the Metaplast. Right, Wiesner? Right. Now let's go look at the launching pad. Much more interesting." It had indeed been interesting, but it hadn't told him any more about Metaplast. And neither had anyone else.

"Oh, I wear well," Nick said modestly. "Have you enjoyed working on this project?"

"The project, certainly. The work, of course. But the place—!" She

made a face and shook her head. "Tell me what it's like in Buenos Aires. I have never been there."

Fortunately he had, although not recently, and he told her all about it while he watched a little scene across the room and tried to read the lips. But too many weaving people with glasses waving in their hands were wandering back and forth across his line of vision. Still, he could see the three men and gather something of the flavor of the conversation.

Even from where he sat it didn't taste too good.

Krutch tossed his great head in Nick's direction and spoke in a low growl.

"You satisfied with the plans, Wiesner?"

The distinguished-looking Dr. Wiesner nodded.

"Helmut and I have been over them thoroughly. They are ingenious, as to be expected. Perhaps a touch more intricate than I had thought. But excellent."

"So. Will you need Burgdorf's supervision?"

"Supervision? Certainly not! Perhaps a little consultation in the final phases, but I am quite qualified to complete what I began." Wiesner's rich tones were indignant.

Krutch grinned hugely, exposing massive teeth. "You had better be. That's why I hired you. And I would prefer you to postpone the consultation as long as you can. You and Wulff here will carry on without him until I give the word."

Dr. Helmut Wulff raised his handsome brows. "You do not trust him?"

"Trust? I?" Krutch barked with laughter. "I take no chances, Dr. Wulff. And there are still things I want to know about Burgdorf. He tells a good story, but I still wonder why we heard the craft and didn't see it. And how a Chinese pilot, flying an unmarked helicopter from Laos to a place he has never seen before, managed to find us quite so easily."

"The trees," Wiesner suggested reasonably. "We see little of the sky from here. We often hear aircraft flying overhead, but we seldom see a plane. That works both ways, of course, but he did say they spent half an hour searching. And we did hear the noise of the craft for just about that long. Also, he had those very powerful binoculars."

"I know all that," Krutch growled impatiently. "And more besides. But I'm taking no chances at this late stage. So you are going to lend me Ilse."

Helmut Wulff bristled and leaned forward. "What do you mean, lend her to you?"

Krutch grinned unpleasantly. "You've been afraid of that, haven't you? But not this time, my pompous young friend. I want her to

seduce Burgdorf, not me. In their less breathless moments she will find out all she can about him and report back to me.”

“But that is the girl I plan to marry!” Helmut said hotly. “You can’t ask her to do a thing like that.”

“Oh, yes, I can,” said Krutch. “I tell her what to do, just as I tell you. Remember our arrangement.” His piggy eyes blazed into Wulff’s. “I pay you well, as long as everything is satisfactory. Everything. And you had better remind her of that when you give her my instructions. Or I will do it myself—and give her a demonstration of what I expect of her.”

“You—!”

“Don’t raise your hand to me,” Krutch rumbled, and his own great hand shot out across the table and caught Wulff’s in a bone crushing grip. His bearded face was fit with a jovial smile, as if he were having a friendly little bout of Indian wrestling, but his eyes were chips of ice. “That is a mistake, Helmut.” He squeezed once, grinning hugely, and something snapped. Wulff gasped and turned the color of a freshly laundered sheet.

“You must be cooperative, Helmut,” Wiesner said smoothly. “Of course we must do what Mr. Krutch suggests. It is a sensible precaution. Now go to your room and attend to your hand. I will speak to Ilse myself. I am sure she will want to be of help. Quite sure.” He smiled gently.

From across the room Nick saw Helmut Wulff, his face tense and pale, rise from Krutch’s table and walk quickly out of the mess hall.

“Dr. Wulff doesn’t seem to be in a party mood,” Nick observed.

“Oh, doesn’t he?” She said it completely without interest, and it was clear she hadn’t even seen Wulff leave.

Aha, thought Nick; his yen for her is strictly a oneway street. Good! He gave her his most charming smile.

“Perhaps we can go outside and take a walk,” he suggested. “I’m not too fond of mess hall parties myself.”

Ilse shook her head regretfully. “I’m afraid we can’t,” she said, “unless we go with Karl or Krutch. We’re not encouraged to go wandering around the grounds at night.”

“Oh. Well, then, maybe you’ll tell me about your work. Everyone was rather vague in my little tour today, I thought, and now that I’m here I’m naturally interested in other phases of the project. For instance, the first-stage rocket—”

“Sorry again,” she said. “Didn’t they tell you? We don’t talk to each other about our work. Everything is in neat compartments. The right hand doesn’t know what the left is doing. Only Krutch and Wiesner know.” There was a touch of bitterness in her voice. “They seem to think there’s something unsafe about sharing scientific information.”

“Even with me?” Nick produced an expression of mock outrage. “But I’m such a trustworthy man.”

The dimple deepened again. “I’m sure you are,” she said demurely. “You have an honest face. Come, let’s go and get ourselves another drink and then go meet some of the others. You must be bored, sitting here with me.”

He protested that he wasn’t the least bit bored, but he went along with her willingly. Maybe he’d find someone with a loose tongue before the evening was out. As he followed her between the tables to a rowdy group of technicians he saw Krutch sitting alone, apparently deep in thought. The Chinese, Ah Choy, was nowhere in sight.

Nick wondered about him. What position he held, where he was right now, and what he might be doing.

Ah Choy closed the inner door leading to his office and walked across the thick carpeting of his sumptuous room. He paused beside the bed and looked down at the dreaming girl.

She was only half-covered by the sheet and he could see the soft thighs that had so often parted for him. His gaze stroked over her body. Smooth skin, pale copper with the slightly olive tint, that he found so attractive ... small, perfect nose, long-lashed eyes, and rich, ripe lips ... small but perfect breasts, made for a hand to clasp ... exquisite limbs that trembled slightly as he leaned over to touch her with a lover’s intimacy. She was his, all his. His to use as he wanted. His to lend to Krutch when the need arose, his to use as bait to dangle before another man.

“Lin Suy.” His fingers trailed across her nipples. “Wake.”

She gave a little sigh and her eyelids fluttered open.

“What is it?” she said sleepily. “Does Krutch want me again?”

“Not now.” He sat down on the bed beside her and fondled the gentle curve of her bare belly. “There is something else.”

“Aaahh.” Lin Suy sighed happily and caught at his hand, moving it down so that it rested in the cleft of her legs. “This?”

“Later,” said Ah Choy, feeling the heat rise within him. “You saw the new man who came to the camp today?”

She nodded. “One of those stiff-necked Germans. I did not like him.”

“You must try,” Ah Choy said softly. “Try very hard to like him and make him like you. Tonight, when that foolish party is over and he has slept some little time, you must go in to see him. Talk to him. Say that you are lonely here, unhappy, that you are afraid of Krutch. Say anything. But start him talking about himself. Find out everything you can about his background and his journey here. Be devious, my little blossom. Be very subtle. But make him talk to you. If he is ... shy

tonight, then you must try again in your own clever way. You must make him trust you, make him want you, make him pour out his heart”

“I will try, my love.” Lin Suy looked up into his eyes and softly stroked his face. “But how shall I make him like me if he does not want to?”

Ah Choy laughed quietly. The blood was pulsing at his temples.

“You know how. Practice a little. Practice with me.”

High-polished shoes and crisply pressed trousers dropped to the floor.

“He may not make it quite so easy as that,” Lin Suy murmured, but she slid the rest of his clothes off him without another word.

Ah Choy lay beside her. “Now,” he breathed. “I am a stiff-necked German, without heat or passion. What do you do to arouse my blood, my little petal?”

He waited, determined to contain himself, to resist the most compelling of her caresses to the point where the most coldblooded of men would be forced to surrender.

His resistance was, as usual, brief. Lin Suy’s dainty, expert fingers played upon his body, tantalizing, probing, massaging, until his muscles stiffened with pent-up energy. Then came her lips, her kisses, the biting and the sucking, the deliberate, gentle grinding that was too much for him to fight and just right for him to join. He gasped hoarsely and flung himself upon her, loosing the flood of his desire in a sudden galloping motion that had them both gasping in unison for blinding moments of exquisite pleasure. They writhed together on the bed, a living Chinese puzzle interlinked, and then lay spent and silent.

Lin Suy’s soft hand trailed over him. Ah Choy trembled. He was not spent yet, after all. But he must release her now. He was, after all, a high-ranking member of Chinese Intelligence, and he must not let pleasure interfere with business.

Not for long, at any rate.

He moaned with delight as she began to fondle him again.

Nick sat in the Lotus position on the rich pile carpeting the floor of his room and meditated, but his thoughts had nothing to do with Yoga.

The party was over and as far as he was concerned it had been a bomb. Krutch had broken it up with one shattering roar and ordered everyone to bed and they had gone, like obedient little boys. And girl. Killmaster had trotted off as docilely as all the rest. But he was probably the only one waiting for the camp to settle down so that he could take a prow. If a guard stopped him he would—think about it when the time came.

Metaplast, he thought. Burgdorf didn't know the meaning of it. And Burgdorf didn't know the purpose of the metal balls. So maybe Metaplast and the metal balls were one and the same thing.

And Ah Choy. A Chinese watchdog, it would seem, with a little piece of Eurasian fluff tucked away in the background. And quite a piece, too, from the glimpse he'd caught of her before the party.

Then there was the business of the search. Someone had carefully gone through his possessions while he had been gone from his room, but not so carefully that their efforts didn't show. But there hadn't been much to find. Wilhelmina, Hugo, Pierre, the wristwatch and the lighter had all been on his person at the time. The binoculars lay almost exactly where he'd left them, their special safety catch untouched; the cigars were all intact.

But obviously his hosts were not quite satisfied with him.

Too bad.

He stretched, yawned, and lay flat down on his back on the luxurious rug to relax his body systematically after his set of exercises. He was so relaxed that he did not hear the soft footfalls coming to his door. But he did hear the gentle rapping.

"Come in," he called, and rolled indolently to a comfortable sitting position.

The door opened and shut quickly, and Ilse stood before him in a long, form-fitting dressing robe. She stared.

"I thought you'd be the one to be surprised," she said, in a voice that was pleasantly husky but a little strained. "But—what are you doing on the floor?"

Nick bounded to his feet. "I'm glad at least I had my shorts on," he said, not altogether truthfully. "Just doing some exercises, keeping in trim. Sorry I'm not dressed for company. Please come in, sit down."

She looked hesitant.

"A nightcap," Nick said briskly, and turned to the portable bar so thoughtfully provided by the management. "Champagne? Scotch? Gin? Vietnamese vodka? Dreadful stuff. Scotch, I think." He poured two stiff shots quickly, gave one to her, and briskly pulled on his shirt.

"Now perhaps you'll feel less shy," he said, and grinned as he flung himself into a chair facing hers. "I don't know what there is about a bare male chest at night that makes a lady blush, but there must be something. Because you are blushing, and you look most attractive."

Her blush deepened and she lowered her eyes.

"I feel like a fool coming here at this time of night," she said abruptly. "But there's an atmosphere about this place that hasn't got at you yet, and I need to talk to someone real, to someone human."

"I hope I qualify," Nick said. "Let's talk."

Krutch sat in the vast armchair in the living room of his suite and glowered at the Chinese. "It's about time, Ah Choy," he growled from his deep chest. "What's been keeping you?"

Ah Choy sat down in a straight-backed chair and smoothed the crease of his trousers.

"I have been doing some thinking," he said. "Like you, I am not altogether satisfied with the man's story. I checked by radio with Liu Chan as soon as I was able to get hold of him, and he reports that he did get a message from the Buenos Aires group—now in Paris, of course— saying that Burgdorf would be slightly delayed and would be routed through Laos rather than Hanoi. They felt it safer for some reason."

"Yes, but what reason?" Krutch demanded, reaching for a bottle and filling his glass.

Ah Choy shrugged. "They did not say. You know these messages must be kept short. Perhaps it is as Burgdorf says—a rumor via East Germany that there are spies in Hanoi who are—"

"Don't tell me what Burgdorf said!" Krutch bellowed angrily. "I heard him. I want to know what Paris said. Did Liu Chan check back with the Paris box number to make sure they did send that message?"

Ah Choy's drab skin paled.

"I do not know. We, too, must keep our messages short I cannot exchange endless—"

"You can exchange enough to find out what we have to know." Krutch's big paw slammed down heavily on the arm of his chair. "And you had better do it now. Why in the name of hell do we have nothing but a moron at the Chinese Embassy and a Paris box number to make contact with? Get on with your job, you slimy fool."

Ah Choy turned even paler. He rose stiffly from his chair.

"May I remind you, Mr. Krutch, that you are in the pay of my country and that I am here to see that you do your job. Also, the money is in my charge. It is not in your interests to talk that way to me."

Krutch bared his teeth in a gorilla's smile. "I'm not worried about getting the money out of you," he said, almost pleasantly. "I'll tear you apart with one hand to get it if I want to, and all the Chinese guards in the world will be too late to help you. Bear that in mind, little man. Now what is it you claim you've been doing some thinking about?"

Ah Choy controlled his angry trembling.

"If the man is not Burgdorf he can be made to give himself away, if not by your scientists then by me. I have assigned Lin Suy to him. She is, as you may know yourself, an expert in the art of seduction. She will win his confidence and make him talk, if anyone can."

Krutch stared. "You mean you've told her to go to bed with him?"

"Of course, why not? Simply because you've had her several times does not mean that she is your property. She is my assistant, to do what I tell her to do. You have no right to object."

"Object?" Krutch threw back his head and roared with laughter. "It isn't that, my scheming friend. I don't object at all. Oho ho!" He slapped his stiff leg and bellowed with delight. "He's going to be a busy man. Oh yes! And the traffic—I can just see them bumping into each other in the corridor outside his room. Ho, ho, ho, ho!" His bull's roar of merriment slammed across the room and tears oozed down his cheeks.

"I do not understand the joke," Ah Choy said haughtily.

"You don't have to, you pasty-faced fool. Now get out of here and go about your business."

Ah Choy left. The bellows of laughter followed him down the hall.

He scowled to himself as he walked past Use's room to his own quarters and prepared to get into his empty bed. There was nothing funny about this situation. Nothing at all.

CHAPTER 8

ENCORE!

Use shuddered in Nick's arms.

They lay together in the darkness of his room, touching tentatively in the first phases of love play, and heard the fading echo of Krutch's distant mirth.

"I wonder what he finds to laugh at," she whispered. "Something horrible, I suppose. He's like an ogre in some childhood fairy tale, one who pulls the limbs off people as if they were the wings off flies. God, I loathe him. He frightens me as if I were still a child."

"But you're not," Nick murmured appreciatively, and pressed his open mouth against a nipple that was demanding his attention. He took his time with it, stroking the softness to the south of her belly as he drew the little mound of eager flesh between his teeth, for such a thing of velvety beauty deserved to be treated with respect ... the right kind of respect. He tongued the little mound until it seemed to melt in his mouth, and then he moved on to the other one.

Ilse sighed and churned her magnificent hips toward him as his trailing fingers roved around her navel and then turned south again.

"No, I am no child," she whispered. "Let's forget Krutch, the whole place, everything. I want to lose myself!"

Nick slowly began leading her astray.

Or perhaps it was she who was leading him astray, he thought. They had talked for a while of Krutch's cruelty, of Wiesner's dedication to his work, of Helmut's possessiveness and of her loneliness, and then either he or she had very neatly persuaded the other into bed. He rather thought that she had been the one to make the precipitating move. Certainly she had been the one to come to his room unasked. Somehow she hadn't seemed like that kind of girl.

But now she did. He felt her warmth responding to his touch, felt her give herself up totally to his sensuous caresses. She stretched and flexed beside him, making little sighing sounds and feeling out his body with fluttering hands and twitching legs that became bolder and more urgent as desire rose.

Nick's lips trailed over her body, over waist and hip and thigh and then back to her waiting mouth while his hands kneaded the soft places and made them tremble deliciously.

"Ah, you know how to do it, don't you?" she breathed. "Ah, yes, you know... ." She clung to him and crooned with pleasure as he made a pillow of her body and lay full-length upon her.

He had reservations still, but not about her lovemaking. There was no artifice in the way she kissed and clung, nothing mechanical about her spontaneous gyrations. Not a few of the many women he had met had been trained to use their sexual talents to lure and entrap, but Ilse was not one of them. No matter why she'd come to him, she was being herself.

A voluptuous, full-bodied, direct and ardent self.

With one small part of his mind he was still Killmaster, and alert. The rest of his mind and all his body pulsed with the excitement of taking a woman who wanted to be taken and yet wanted to delay the moment until delay was unendurable.

Her legs went around his and locked him close to her, and he felt as though he were diving into a deep, quiet pool that bubbled with turbulence far below its surface. For moments they glided together, two bodies joined as one, two minds that swam together in a haze of ecstasy.

Every nerve in their joint bodies surrendered to the fluid moment as they plunged deeper into the darkness of oblivion. He whispered to her, meaningless things that made her sigh and dig her strong fingers into his shoulder blades, and she whispered back in little broken phrases that said the same things as her undulating thighs.

Then the turbulence erupted. It was as if a volcanic explosion had ripped upward through the surface calm, and then all illusion was gone. They were man and woman in bed, doing what man and woman should do, and the explosion was the ultimate meeting of high passion and taut flesh. She engulfed him as he thrust, and they rocked exultantly together as senses swirled and nerve ends seemed to melt with the blazing heat. Thighs strained and mouths met and the darkened room turned upside down with the convulsion on the bed.

They gasped together and held each other as close as man and woman could. Slowly, the room righted itself. Slowly, dreamily, they parted, but still they lay almost as one.

There was silence for a little while. Then Use stirred and brushed her lips against Nick's mouth.

"Happy," she murmured. "Very happy." And suddenly she was kissing him, with an intensity even greater than before. His tongue sought hers and trapped it gendy, but all at once she had pulled away and was looking down at him in the darkness.

"How long must it take?" she whispered urgently. "How long before we leave this place?"

"Why, about three days for the triggering device," he said, surprised. She knew that as well as he did. "I don't know what the arrangements are about leaving. I haven't asked. Don't you know either?"

She bypassed his question. "Are you sure it's going to work?"

"Of course it's going to work. We've spent months on it, tested everything. It's a simple operation, you must know that. After all, it's closely connected with your end of the work, isn't it?" Nick stared through the darkness at her, wishing he could see her face.

"Yes, but—I couldn't bear it if anything went wrong and we had to stay here any longer. I want to get out of here. I want to get out of here with you."

Nick reached for the switch of the bedside lamp and clicked it on.

"We'll be out soon," he said gendy, gazing at her tousled hair and parted lips. "What's worrying you? What can possibly go wrong?"

"Oh, it's ..." She made an uncertain little gesture with her hand and shook her head. "I don't know. Something. I mean, you must have had some reason for coming here the way you did, and not the usual way. Was someone after you? Who? Why?"

"It was just a security precaution," he said, watching her closely. "No real need for it, I'm sure. But my group decided it must be taken, and so it was. There's nothing to worry about."

She sighed and touched his hand. "I suppose not. It's just this place; it's getting on my nerves. Tell me about Paris—no, tell me about your student days. I didn't have any. I did all my studying under Karl."

"Well, of course, mine were rather disrupted too, because of the ... um, aftermath of the War," he began, and launched into the carefully prepared story of Erich Burgdorf's past.

"And how did you come to join the Buenos Aires group?"

He told her. That, and all the other things she asked.

They were the most guileless questions in the world; they astonished him, and so did she. It seemed incredible that anyone who had been sent to worm information out of him, to trap him in his own words, should be so un-subtle about it. And he knew, now, that she had been sent. Again she asked him worriedly about the spies supposedly lurking in Hanoi. Again he reassured her that there was nothing to fear. But he himself had told her nothing of this before, nor had she known about the so-called spies while the two of them were together at the party.

So, obviously, she had talked with Krutch or Wiesner since the party, and agreed or maybe volunteered to soften up the suspect and ask a few sly questions. Only trouble was, her questions weren't sly at all. They were just about as obvious as if she'd said, "Look, I've been sent to make love to you and find out if you really are Burgdorf. Are you?"

At last he yawned and said, "Ah, well, busy day tomorrow. Better get some sleep. Shall I see you home, or are you staying overnight?" It

wasn't very delicately put, but he did want to know. There were still some things he wanted to do, and luscious though she was she would get in the way.

"It is better that I go," she said. "But of course there is no need to walk me to my room. It would be ... embarrassing."

No doubt she would find it so, if Wiesner were waiting up for her report.

She rose and quickly slipped the dressing robe over her creamy bareness, wrapping it around the splendidly curved body that had promised so much and given it all. Nick came up behind her and cupped her breasts in his hands.

"Thank you," he murmured, pressing himself close against her and kissing the nape of her neck.

For a moment he was stirred again and sensed the same in her. Whatever else she might be, she was breathtaking, desirable, made for a man to love. She put her hands over his and held them tight against her. Then she pulled herself away quickly and went to the door.

"Allow me," Nick said gallantly. He opened it and took a quick look down the hall. There was no one in sight and all the other doors were closed. The strains of some strident German symphony came to him from somewhere at the other end of the building. Helmut? he wondered. He also wondered briefly who had the room directly opposite his, one of several he had not been shown, and told himself that he would soon find out.

He smiled at Ilse and looked deep into her eyes.

"Are you going to tell Dr. Wiesner what a nice evening we've had?" he asked, very gently.

Her eyes widened suddenly and blood rushed to her cheeks.

"What—I—why—?" She stopped and collected her words. Her gaze was cool but her face was hot. "It's hardly the sort of thing one talks about," she said evenly, and turned away.

"No," said Nick. "It isn't. Goodnight."

She walked quickly down the carpeted hall without a backward glance, head held high and divine derriere swaying indignantly.

Nick watched her go. It had been a nice evening, though it looked as if Taggart had been right about her being a bitch. Yet he liked her, and not just for what she had done with him in bed. It was strange, it was contradictory, but still he thought there was an honesty about her.

He closed the door and padded over his downy soft carpet to the small dressing room with its shower stall. Ilse and company probably weren't quite ready to settle down for the night he figured, so he might as well give himself a bracing needle shower before taking his evening walk.

A minute later he stood under the stinging spray singing softly to himself in a lazy baritone.

"Oh, she's always true to her daddy in her fashion," he warbled cheerfully, "she's always true to her pappy in her way. Many brave hearts are asleep in the deep so beware, be-e-e-e-ware." Beware indeed, he told himself. Burgdorf wouldn't sing like that Now what would Burgdorf sing, if anything?

He didn't know any songs about triggering devices so he gave up and whistled Beethoven instead until he was saturated. He stepped out of the stall, grabbed a towel, and stood stockstill in the little dressing room. The bedroom door was out of his line of vision, but he had heard the sound.

Of the door latch, and the closing.

Coming or going? The room was absolutely silent.

Wilhelmina and all his other friends were in their places and within his grasp. But Dr. Burgdorf would scarcely meet night visitors with a gun in his hand.

Perhaps Ilse had come back.

Nick draped the towel around his waist and glided to the dressing room door.

At first glance he thought that Ilse had come back and was waiting for him. And then he saw that this girl was totally unlike the Nordic blonde who had last occupied his bed.

"How nice of you to come," he said, and padded into the room. "But I don't believe we've met ... ?"

She smiled languorously at him from his pillows and her eyes were deep, enigmatic wells under their sweeping lashes.

"You, I know," she said, in a lilting, husky voice. "I, I am Lin Suy." She sat up, graceful and catlike in her movements, and the flimsy gown that was already wide open at the neck managed to fall a little lower over the shoulders. "It is too late for me to come? Earlier there were voices in your room, so I waited in the sitting room across the hall. It was that woman scientist, no? That cold German thing?" An expression of distaste briefly marred her exquisite, copper-olive features. "She lives for nothing but her work, that one."

"So it seems," said Nick, his eyes riveted to her small but delectable breasts. "Would you excuse me while I dress?"

"Dress?" Lin Suy laughed throatily and gazed at him with frank appraisal. "That body, you must not dress. It is good for a woman to look upon." Her glance strolled down his muscular chest and rested on the towel. "Very good to look upon. I, too, like to wear little. Do you find me good to look upon?"

"Delightful," said Nick, eying an interestingly exposed curve of thigh. "Did you want to see me about something?"

Laughter bubbled in her lovely throat. "Oh, you Germans, you are funny! But of course I did. I want to tell you about a little custom we have here in Vietnam. You have been here before?"

Nick shook his head.

"Then you would like to know the customs, yes? But you have champagne, I see. I like champagne. Give me some, and let us talk. But I do not like your bed. It is too hard." She rose as fluidly as a female genie from a bottle and flicked the pillows onto the floor. "I will sit here. You too, please, when you are ready."

Nick busied himself with the bottle and his thoughts. Lin Suy interrupted them.

"Your body, it is magnificent," she said softly. "Wide shoulders, very strong. Fine legs, I like."

"Thank you," Nick said politely, and popped the cork.

"That woman," Lin Suy said speculatively. "That German thing. She really is cold, yes?"

"Oh, very." Nick shook his head sadly. "Not at all like what I've heard about the women of the East." He filled the glasses and came to her.

"Sit." She patted the rich softness of the rug beside her. "The floor is all right for you? Where I come from we do not use much the chairs and bed. But champagne, I learn easily to like!" She smiled and drank with evident relish.

"Prosit," said Nick, sipping from his own glass and averting his eyes from the tiny tuft of down that peeped from the lower half of the gaping gown. "Now what was that custom you were going to tell me about?"

She reached out a tiny, perfect hand and placed it on his thigh. "You don't mind I touch you? That is part of custom. You see, in Vietnam when we have honored visitor, we make him welcome. Head of household gives him daughter to be wife and make him happy. This is not village here but it is Vietnam and you are honored visitor. So I come to you. I make nice for you, and you make nice for me." She smiled engagingly and trailed her fingers over his leg.

"That's extremely kind," said Nick, "but I wasn't actually thinking of getting married."

"No, not to marry!" She laughed merrily. "Is no need to marry, to give you woman's comfort. But not like a wife then, if it frightens you. Like a mistress, so that you will be very happy here. Do you like this place? I do not."

"Well, I must say I find the hospitality extraordinary," Nick murmured. "What is it that you don't care for about the place?"

She shrugged expressively. "It is shut in, it is ugly. And that Krutch, he is a beast."

“Doesn’t anybody around here like that man?” he asked, and drained his glass. “It seems to me that he has things admirably organized.”

“Pooh, organized. What is so wonderful about that? It is all you Germans think of. But there are more important things than that.” Her small hand brushed against the corner of the towel and lifted it almost as if by accident.

“What are they?” Nick said, wondering how much this seductive little piece was likely to know about Metaplast and the projectile.

“Making nice,” she said, gently removing his glass from his fingers and putting it down with her own. “Like this.” Her arms snaked lightly about his neck and her lips met his. But not for long. Her tongue unlocked his mouth and darted in.

It was an expert kiss, hot and close and full of exciting promise, like a foretaste of what the rest of her body was ready to do.

“Touch me,” she whispered, “touch me,” drawing her mouth away for just long enough to breathe the words and then crushing it back against his with the soft lips fully parted and ready to receive him. One hand stopped fondling his neck for the one second needed to tug lightly at his towel, and then went back to hold his head to hers. Her body rubbed against his, back and forth, back and forth, and he felt the gown slip away and the soft breasts crush against him.

He reached into its silky folds below her waist and slid his hand down to the waiting softness. Her legs closed on his fingers. He felt a tiny pulse beating against them.

The long kiss ended with her little gasp and he drew his hand away. Her own small fingers reached down and clutched at him.

“Ah, no, you do not stop now,” she breathed. “There must be more, there must be more! Lie with me and I will give you pleasure you have never known before.”

He doubted that, although his pulse was racing. His hands cupped her face and made her look at him.

“Do you provide this service for everyone in camp?” he asked. “Or do you take time out to work on the project?”

She drew away a little with a hurt look on her face.

“I told you—for honored visitor. And what are all the others? They are nothing. Work on the project! What do I know about that? It is nothing to me, like those other men. But you ... Do you not want that we should love? It is dishonor to me if you do not find me pleasing.” Her eyes were downcast but her tiny hands were roaming. “Want me,” she whispered. “Want me, please. I will make you very glad.” She bent low and kissed him where her hands had been.

“I must lock the door,” he muttered, and dragged himself away.

She gave a little laugh and peeled the filmy robe off to lie

completely naked on the soft, thick carpet.

"No one will come here," she tinkled.

"I'm not so sure," Nick said, and slid the bolt. He could still hear faint music from beyond the door. From somewhere in the night he heard the sound of a command and several heavy-booted feet tramping back and forth. The changing of the guard at Ulric Krutch's palace. He made a mental note of the approximate time and went back to her where she lay. She caught at him and drew him down beside her.

"I show you," she whispered. "You do nothing, first. I do, I show."

She rolled over like a tiger cat and crouched between his legs, and her little mouth got very busy. It was play, at first, gentle and somehow dainty, and he tingled with expectation of what was to come even while he forced himself to stay alert. He could have turned her out, of course, but— She was less playful now, and much more urgent. Little sharp teeth entrapped him; a darting tongue flickered and fluttered like a butterfly and then struck him lightly with its tiny, well-aimed blows. Dark hair brushed against his thighs, and fingers stole behind his legs to caress and gently dig.

Nick was awash with sensation, knowing that she was playing him like an instrument and yet enjoying it with almost every fiber of his being. Almost. For it was not his nature to be passive, nor to give himself up completely to the wiles of a professional. He controlled himself with an effort and subtly maneuvered her so that he was less at her mercy and she more at his, and then he gave her something of his own expertise.

She countered with even more of her own, using every trick of seduction and stimulation to arouse and tantalize, and he recognized each one of them. Their meeting on the downy carpet became a duel between two sinuous, agile bodies and two minds whose sexual knowledge matched. Still he tried to be not too obviously expert, thinking to himself that German scientists probably were not. He let her give him what she had while he fought off complete abandonment and let one corner of his mind stay cool and analytical. It told him that she also had been sent to trap him, and that the sender this time was probably Ah Choy. Intelligence? he wondered, as the sensuous body squirmed against him. Must be, he decided, giving Lin Suy a tweak that made her squeal with heightened pleasure.

Then she was on him like a tigress, raking him with such frenzy that he thought the bout would end in seconds in a double knockdown. But he had underestimated her. Her frenzy changed suddenly into kittenish languor and then just as suddenly into a slow writhing that deliciously postponed the moment of release but kept the passion smoldering. She was an enchantress, an Oriental houri, a

siren leading him by twists and turns to inevitable destruction.

At last she gave a little cry and came astride him with her legs beating against his sides, as if she were a rider in a sudden hurry to reach a destination.

"Give, give," she groaned, and hammered at him with her little fists.

He gave. She gave in return. The one light in the room seemed to brighten and dim and blaze again as their two bodies jolted together. There was a prolonged moment of exquisite feeling so heightened that it was almost a sound—piercing, like a scream of rapture. Then it slowly died.

Lin Suy rolled away from him and sunk her face into a pillow with a little quivering sigh. "Make very nice," she murmured, and fell, catlike, into instant sleep.

Nick collected his scattered thoughts. The services of the house were great, but he had other things to do. He let her rest for a few minutes and then he touched her dark hair softly.

"It was a warm and wonderful welcome," he said. "But I think you'd better leave me now."

She turned her head and reached her arms out to him, awake on the instant.

"No, you carry me to the bed. It will no longer feel so hard. We sleep a little. Then we make love again."

"Lin Suy, you can't stay," he said firmly, rising to his feet. "It's late, the project is at its most important stage, and I'm sure we both have much to do tomorrow."

"Ptui, the work!" she said scornfully. "I have nothing to do with that. Have I not pleased you? Do you think I am a paid thing, that you should use me and then throw me out?"

He reasoned, he cajoled; she wept a little.

In the end they went together to the bed.

He lay in the darkness listening to the footsteps of the guards and the slow rise and fall of the breathing beside him. There were ways that he could put her out of action while he went about his business, but they were all rather drastic for so early in the game and would certainly cause comment.

The night wore on. Sometimes they slept, sometimes they talked a little, sometimes they did other things. At last she fell into what seemed to be a deep and dreamless sleep.

He waited for a while and then slid soundlessly out of bed.

Bedclothes whispered behind him.

"Where are you going?" said Lin Suy.

"Must you ask?" he said irritably, and spent a moment in the little cubicle beside the shower stall. Then he went back to bed.

Lin Suy's arms went around him.

"Make nice," she murmured. "Soon is light. I go then."

Good old Killmaster, he told himself bitterly. Caught like a rat in a trap his first night out. A tender, clinging trap.

Well, better relax and enjoy it. Tomorrow is another day.

He surrendered to her insinuating touch and went down, gasping, for the third time.

CHAPTER 9

WHO'S AFRAID OF HELMUT WULFF?

Sunlight streamed through the breaks in the foliage and beat down on the great complex of camouflaged buildings. Machinery hummed. Guards tramped back and forth impassively.

Ulric Krutch's enormous figure emerged from the living quarters and stomped across the grounds.

"Ah Choy!" he bellowed. "Ah Choy! Where the devil are you? You, fellow!" He stopped before one of the immobile guards in front of the workshop and glowered down at him. "Where's your chief Chinaman?"

"He iss in the radio room, sir," the guard answered precisely.

"Radio room? And about time too. Ah Choy!" Krutch turned away abruptly and redoubled his volume.

A slim figure hurried out of the radio shack and came toward him.

"There you are, you dawdling bastard!" Krutch roared. "Come here!"

Ah Choy scudded to his side.

"They will hear you in Hanoi, my good Krutch," he said, smiling stiffly. "Perhaps it would be wise for you to lower your voi—"

"Well, they don't seem to hear you," said Krutch, toning down to a growling mutter. "Any further word from Liu Chan?"

Ah Choy shook his head and looked around as if expecting to find Dr. Erich Burgdorf peering over his shoulder, which he wasn't. "He sent a message to Paris but as yet there has been no answer."

"Not yet?" Krutch's barrel chest swelled with anger. "Is Liu Chan even more incompetent than you? Can't Paris hear him? Shall I shout to them to get results? You are fools, both of you."

A muscle twitched in Ah Choy's jaw. "One does not talk to a box number," he hissed. "One waits for a reply, which is seldom instantaneous, if ever. And I remind you again that you are employed by my government and they expect their intelligence officials to be treated with respect."

"Respect, pah!" Krutch said, and spat mightily. "What about Lin Suy—she get anywhere with him?"

Ah Choy nodded. "The initial meeting has been most satisfactory," he said.

Krutch's small eyes glinted with interest. "What did she find out?"

Ah Choy's mouth twisted in a malicious smile.

"That as a lover he makes you seem like a man with not just one

wooden leg but two, and nothing in between them.” He turned away quickly before Krutch’s blow could fall and darted back toward the living quarters.

Krutch snarled angrily and took a lumbering step after him with one massive arm outstretched. Then he cursed and turned on his heel, glowering like a thundercloud.

Dr. Wiesner looked up from his workbench in the laboratory.

“Please, Krutch. These are delicate instruments. Step a touch more lightly, if you would be so kind.”

“To hell with that,” Krutch growled. “Where is that fellow Burgdorf?”

“Off somewhere with Ilse. He was here until a moment ago.” Wiesner bent his leonine head over his work. “We discussed the plans quite thoroughly and I must say he strikes me as an extremely competent and knowledgeable man.”

“Does he, now. And how does he strike Ilse?”

“Much the same way. He talked quite freely about his background and training, and everything he said rang true. I begin to think we are wrong to be suspicious. It was quite difficult for me to persuade him that I do not need his help, especially in view of the fact that Helmut is not his usual bright and shining self.”

“Oh, difficult, was it?” Krutch rumbled. “Over-eager, hah? Anxious to get on with his spying, I suppose.”

Wiesner shook his head. “Hardly over-eager. Quite normally interested and disappointed, I would say.” He shot a thoughtful glance at Krutch. “Ilse feels that he is aware of our suspicions and quite resentful of them. That, too, is normal, it would seem to me. But there is a danger there, I think. Supposing he is what he seems—a genuine member of the Buenos Aires group. Who knows how his allegiance may change if he feels he is being slighted?”

“Bah! His allegiance is nothing to me.” Krutch reached for a laboratory stool and thrust it beneath his vast hindquarters to sit there like a big, bad-tempered frog on a tiny lily pad. “I have no further need for him when this job is done. Perhaps not even now.”

“Possibly not,” Wiesner agreed. “But don’t forget that the German group has proved its use to your Chinese friends in many ways before now. It is not unlikely that there are other projects on which the Chinese will require their further cooperation. As I think you will require mine.” There was a thread of cold menace in his pleasant voice and a look in his eyes to match it.

“Don’t be too sure about my requirements, Wiesner,” Krutch growled quietly. “Don’t ever be too sure. And as for Burgdorf—are you telling me that you now trust him completely and intend to give him the run of the place? Because I don’t intend to. And I give the orders

here.”

“No, no, I don’t mean that,” said Wiesner. “I’m only suggesting that we handle him with care. Let him work with me on the triggering device, just enough to keep him happy and see that I don’t really need him. In that way I’ll have my eye on him a good part of the time. And for the rest, we can find other ways to keep him occupied.” He smiled. “That is why Ilse is giving him a somewhat more detailed tour than we gave him yesterday. It will make him feel we trust him. And after all, the only thing we’re keeping from him is right in here. And in here there is always someone to watch him.”

“Hmmpf,” said Krutch. “You positive that he won’t be able to wheedle something out of the girl? You’d better be.”

“Oh, I am, I am. She knows what’s good for all of us. And now, Mr. Krutch, I had better get on with my work. It becomes interesting, now that all the components are falling into place.” Wiesner gave a little sigh. “My only regret is that our first shot will not show us immediate results. Two months before the next American Space shot! And even then they may be lucky.”

“Hmmpf,” Krutch said again, but this time sudden merriment creased his face. “Ho, ho, ho, my friend! There is a little something I have been holding back from you.” His great hand slapped his wooden thigh and a huge foot slammed triumphantly against the floor.

“Holding back?” said Wiesner coldly. “May I ask why?”

“No, you may not. I am still waiting for confirmation and further details from my man in Moscow, but this much I can tell you now—Petrovsk I will blast off from the Yaroslod site four days from now. There will be at least three men on board, and maybe more. This is a big one, Wiesner, very big. If we succeed we will make our point in quite a spectacular way. But if you fail—” He paused to chuckle ominously. “If you fail, you will find the results spectacular.”

“Four days!” said Wiesner. “That barely gives us time for the most rudimentary of tests. What if—”

“Be damned to the what ifs! You get to work and have it ready even if you have to work through every night.” Krutch rose from the stool with a thud. “And another thing. I’m going to double the guard from now on. They’re going to be right in here whether you’re working or not and they’re going to be patrolling the work area in double force and they’re going to be watching the living quarters, technicians’ as well as ours. Nothing’s going to go wrong at this stage, or I’m not Ulric Krutch.” He jabbed a meaty forefinger under Wiesner’s nose and turned abruptly to stomp heavily away. “And it’s not just because of Burgdorf,” he added over his shoulder as he reached the door. “Everyone bears watching at a time like this. And then, of course, I don’t want you to be lonely on the long nights

ahead. Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho!”

“Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho,” chuckled the tiny listening device beneath Nick’s collar. Krutch’s heavy footfalls clomped off into the distance and faded out completely. Nick flicked off the switch and looked at the scene on the one live television monitor in front of him. There were five others, but Use had activated only one of the cameras before putting on earphones and getting in contact with Helmut. She was still talking to him, her pretty ears covered by the phones.

It was a pity Krutch had not stayed to talk a little longer, or that Ilse had not called Helmut a minute or two before. Nick thought back over the big fellow’s words as he looked at the televue of the great, sleek rocket towering from its concrete pit half a mile away.

“There will be at least three men on board, and maybe more... .” And that was where he had come in, perhaps just seconds late. At least he knew that Krutch was doubling the guard. But that could scarcely be regarded as good news.

Nick cursed silently and looked at Ilse. She was still deep in discussion with Helmut and her face was flushed. Perhaps one of his tiny limpet mikes could be attached beneath the control panel— He decided against it. He only had two left and there were probably better places for them. Instead he studied the vast switchboards and panels with care. They formed an intricate and bewildering pattern, but he had seen such things before and recognized much of what he saw.

Ilse pulled the earphones off her head and turned to Nick. Her color was even higher than before and her lips were quivering.

“I can’t take you down there right now,” she said shakily. “He has no right to refuse, but he’s in such a foul mood that I can’t argue with him. Do you mind if we go later, when he’s gone?”

“I’d prefer it,” Nick said honestly. “What seems to be his trouble?”

She took a little breath. “You,” she said. “He’s decided that he hates you for—for what he thinks happened last night.”

“Why should he think anything happened?” Nick asked softly.

“He finds out things,” she said, and now her face was blazing. “Where would you like to go now? You’ve seen just about everything.” She walked quickly to the door of the control room and stopped there, not looking at him.

“Back to the lab,” said Nick, “to see how Wiesner’s getting along. He should be about ready to take the plans to the workshop by now and he may need my help.”

“Oh. Oh, I don’t think so,” she said hastily. “He’ll let us know when he’s ready for us. You mustn’t feel left out; he’s like that when he works. You—you haven’t seen my room yet. Why don’t we go there

for a little while?"

He was beside her at the door now and she looked up at him appealingly with a light touch of her fingers on his sleeve.

"A charming idea," he said gendy. "And while we're at it, how about a fast look at the living quarters of the great? Wiesner and Krutch, I mean. I've been given such a fleeting glimpse of them that I really do begin to feel unwanted."

"But that's ridiculous," she said, with a little laugh. "We need you here. Come, let's get out of this dungeon."

A pair of armed guards waited in the corridor outside to close the door of the control room behind them.

Nick followed her eloquent buttocks as she led him through a long, low tunnel to a flight of stairs. It was only one of several he had been taken through, and like all the rest it was built to withstand both heat and shock. Krutch and company knew how to look after themselves, he reflected grimly.

He thought so again when Use showed him the master suites upstairs. Krutch's rooms were on a giant scale and so was all the furniture—vast bed, vast desk, vast chairs, vast bar, vast everything, and all of it luxurious. Wiesner's two rooms were slightly smaller and less overpowering, but they too were like rooms in a luxury hotel. His great, carved desk was bare of papers, the books in their wall shelves stood in neat, straight rows, and even the small file cabinet near the reclining chair was unsullied by the usual trivia. There was a neatness about Wiesner's rooms, in spite of their expensive comfort.

"Nice," said Nick approvingly, as he palmed the last of his limpet mikes and left it clinging to the desk. "Very nice indeed."

"Mine's next door," said Ilse. "A drink before lunch?"

"A bit early, but why not?" he said, following her through the connecting door. Hers was a big bed-sitting- room, much like his, but on it was the stamp of femininity and in it was the lingering odor of some tantalizing and wonderfully feminine perfume.

She poured drinks in silence and then turned to him abruptly.

"To me, last night was not a shabby thing," she said. "It could have been, but it was not." She took a stiff pull of her drink and looked straight into his eyes. "Think what you like about why I came to you, but if you think that I regret it, you are wrong. Did you think it was so terrible? Did you?"

Now what's the woman up to? he wondered, but he was astonished by her intensity. And she was, without a doubt, outrageously beautiful.

"How could I?" he said tenderly. "You were—you are—magnificent Nothing could have been more wonderful." He stroked the silky hair that curled about her ears and kissed her lightly on the

lips.

"Then prove it," she said fiercely, flinging aside her glass as if it contained poison. The thought struck him before he took a sip and he put his own down on the table top. "Prove it to me!" she said again, and thrust her vibrant body against his. Her sudden kiss burned hot against his mouth and he could hear her heart pounding like a drum.

It was a short but breathless journey to the bed.

Clothes dropped one by one to the floor beside it.

This time there was no need for long loveplay. Their two bodies already were acquainted.

The acquaintance deepened rapidly.

They rolled together on the bed in rapturous silence for a few ecstatic moments before the little sounds of growing pleasure began.

"Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful," she whispered, and clenched his maleness to her with all the supple strength of her superb young body.

The earth reeled suddenly and turned upside down, and they melted together in the blazing heat of it... .

It was over, the sudden ardor, the swift explosive fulfillment, the little murmured words of temporary parting.

When Nick left her she looked rosy and enriched, somehow like a contented cloud in feminine form.

He himself was puzzled. Invigorated, yes; but also puzzled. If she had been instructed to occupy his time she had certainly succeeded. But with what sincerity!

He stopped at the open outside door of the living quarters and took a deep breath of the sultry midday air. There was something about that girl he could not understand. This time she had not asked a single question; this time she had given herself to him like a gift with no strings attached, almost as if she were making up for something she had done before. And of course there had been no time to talk of Metaplast.

Nick frowned to himself and walked slowly back to his own room. With Wiesner so cagey and Krutch's Chinese guard redoubled, he was going to have hell's own time finding out anything before his time was up. And that, of course, would be when Wiesner tested the completed triggering device and found it wanting.

He stopped outside his door and looked for the thin thread he had inserted in the crack earlier in the day, after the Chinese orderly had finished with his room. It was gone. And from within the room he heard the quiet sound of a drawer stealthily opening.

He had one tired thought before reaching for his cigarettes and lighter: Please, Lord, not Lin Suy. Then, cigarette in mouth and lighter in hand, he opened the door and walked in like a man without a care

in the world.

Dr. Helmut Wulff looked up from the open top drawer of the Chinese carved bureau. In one hand he held a thick cigar, and in the other he held one half of Nick's binoculars.

"Ah. Burgdorf," he said, and his eyes were slits of hatred.

"Ah. Wulff," Nick said pleasantly. "If you're looking for Ilse I'm afraid you won't find her in there. And if you're looking for anything else, let me know and I'll help you."

"I don't need your help," Wulff said silkily. "I have what I need, I believe." He rolled the tubular binocular part in his hand and looked at it with a crooked smile. "Ah Choy searched, but he did not search too well. Perhaps you would care to tell me how this device works before I turn it in to Krutch. And you can tell me while I smoke one of your excellent cigars." He sniffed the aroma appreciatively and clamped the end between his teeth. Nick flinched. It was the wrong end for action, but the clamping motion made his blood run cold. So did the man's clumsy fingers as he toyed with the right-hand tube of the binoculars.

"Oh, I am armed, by the way," Wulff added, and his bandaged hand slid beneath his jacket and came out with a pistol. "So if you have any thought of attacking me you might as well give it up."

"Attacking you? My dear fellow!" Nick said, half outraged and half amused. "Why should I? Of course I don't like this intrusion of yours—and a gun, for shame!—but I have no intention of attacking you. And the idea of ripping my binoculars apart! Have you gone mad?" He raised the lighter to the tip of his cigarette.

Wulff ducked suddenly. The dart whizzed harmlessly past his head and the cigar fell from his mouth as he opened it to shout, "Put that thing down! I know about those trick lighters—throw it on the rug behind you or I'll shoot."

"Now I know you're insane," Nick said calmly, and lit his cigarette. "Trick lighters! What next, I'd like to know?"

Wulff straightened up. The pistol was still in his bandaged hand and the lethal half of the field-glasses was still in the other. But at least the cigar-grenade was lying harmless on the thickly carpeted floor.

"Next you'll put your hands up and drop that thing as I told you," he said quietly, and cocked the pistol. "Delay one second, and I'll shoot."

Nick looked at the cold eyes in the sullenly handsome face and gave a mental shrug. Wulff would shoot. Explanations would be awkward. He dropped the lighter. It was quieter that way.

Wulff smiled. "Good. Now tell me about this—ah— this binocular. Or monocular, as one might say. They are not normally detachable.

Nor are they usually equipped with triggering mechanisms, as this one is. Why do you have it with you, and what exactly does it do? I should like you to tell me before Dr. Wiesner examines it for himself." His smile deepened. "It will be something of a feather in my cap, as you can well imagine."

"You are an idiot," said Nick. "Feather in your cap be damned. It'll be a boot in your damned tail. Come on, let's go to Wiesner now. Let him take it apart piece by piece and then do the same to you." His hands were only slightly raised but held well apart from his body so that Wulff's itchy trigger finger wouldn't be tempted. As he spoke he lowered them very gradually and flexed the muscles of his right forearm. Hugo slid into his palm and lay there waiting. "Well, what's the matter with you now?" Nick went on, his voice dripping with contempt. "You afraid of making a fool of yourself in front of the rest? I'm not surprised. Screwing apart a pair of field-glasses and then pretending that you've discovered some strange and sinister device! And trick cigarette lighters, no less." He laughed, sighting at his target. Better that already bandaged hand than, say, the throat; the reflexes of sudden death sometimes made triggers go off, and that was noisy. Killing could come later. Besides, Helmut alive and talking might be useful. "Wiesner will find a straitjacket for you, you poor fool," he said easily. "I can hardly wait. Let's go."

He turned toward the door and as he moved his arm came up, back and forward in a sweeping arc that sent Hugo's icepick blade slicing through the air like a streak of greased lightning. Wulff gave one yelping howl as the pistol flew from his grasp, and then Nick's booted foot caught him high under the chin in a vicious savate kick that sent Wulff sprawling back to lie on the carpet limp and quiet as an emptied sack.

Nick bent over him and slid Hugo from the flabby hand. There was very little blood. Hugo always made the most discreet of tiny holes. Then, too, dead men give up the luxury of bleeding.

Wulff must have had very brittle bones. His neck was neatly broken. Killmaster gave him a disgusted look and locked the bedroom door.

Death had come a little sooner than Nick had hoped. It was a nuisance. Now there would be no drugging of Helmut, no pleasant chat in the long afternoon ahead, no carefully planned death by heart attack or apoplexy or poisonous black spider. Pity.

Nick shrugged philosophically and made a rapid search of Helmut's person while wondering what to do with it. But there was nothing of interest about handsome Helmut except for the gun and a few scraps of paper with equations scribbled on them. Nick gave him back the gun and kept the equations. Maybe they, at least, could tell

him something.

He poured himself a drink and looked down at the body.

Damn you, Helmut, he said resentfully beneath his breath. What in hell am I going to do with you?

There was positively no place to hide the body. And there was no doubt that Helmut's absence would be noticed within the next few hours.

Nick cursed again and swallowed thoughtfully. At least the Scotch was good. He screwed his binoculars back together and put them, with the cigar grenade, back in his top drawer. It looked as though he'd have to find some other place to keep them, but at the moment he had a bigger problem.

Name of Helmut.

A gong clanged stridently outside. The ten-minute lunch warning for those who wished to eat in what the technicians called the executives' dining room. Dr. Burgdorf would be expected there; he was not supposed to be particularly busy.

So he had ten minutes, if no one was around to see him.

He heaved Wulffs body out of sight around the bed and padded to the door to see if the coast was clear, rehearsing in his mind the scene he would stage if anyone saw him with Wulffs body in the corridor. A howl of rage on his part at Wulff's insane jealousy of him and Ilse, a sudden savage blow that would send Wulff reeling against the wall to slam his head against it. It was weak, but it was better than nothing and it might keep him alive even though suspect... .

The doorknob rattled as he reached it. Light fingers tapped outside.

"Erich? Erich?" a soft voice crooned. "Let me in, my sweet. It is time for love. Come, open the door for me. I know that you are there."

Lin Suy.

Nick moaned softly to himself. But there was no use postponing the inevitable. He unlocked the door and opened it.

CHAPTER 10

ALIBI AT BEDTIME

"Time for love?" he said. "I thought it was time for lunch."

"Pooh, lunch!" She laughed gaily and flew into his arms, slamming the door shut behind her with one dainty little foot. "What does food matter? Besides, they will not eat up everything before we get there. Love first!"

Strong little fingers drew his head down to hers and little feet strained on tiptoe as her hot Hps burned against his mouth.

"But why did you try to keep me out?" she murmured, after a long and stimulating moment. "Why did you lock the door against me?"

"Not against you, little one," Nick said tenderly. The very presence of Wulff's body behind the bed seemed to be burning into his back. "I just thought I'd rest a little. I wasn't expecting you. But how did you know that I was here?"

The delectable little body shrugged in his arms. "That German woman. I heard her talking to Krutch outside the workshop. She said she had been with you until a moment ago and now you had gone to your room." The strong little fingers suddenly pinched his arm. "You do not like that woman, do you?"

"Like her? That cold creature?" Nick laughed softly and nibbled her ear. "How could I possibly, with someone like you around?" He crushed his mouth against hers and kissed her with well-simulated passion, maneuvering her around so that she faced the door and he the bed.

So they were not too fussy about the lunch hour, he was thinking. Ilse had left her room. Good. Krutch was outside the workshop. With luck he'd go straight to the dining room. Wiesner? Ilse had said he never came back to his quarters until six o'clock sharp. Today could be the exception, of course. Ah Choy? Have to take a chance on him. And on the guards and orderlies.

Nick reached one hand behind his back and quietly locked the door. Helmut would keep awhile. Lin Suy came first.

He strained his body against her in a sudden surge of desire. His hands clawed at the front of her dress and he managed to pant like a hungry animal.

"Lin Suy," he breathed. "Lin Suy!" His fingers started roaming frantically.

"Ah, brute." She laughed softly. "Do you want to be brutal with

me, big, lovely, animal?"

Well, okay. He could be a big, lovely animal if the occasion called for it.

"I do, I will be, you gorgeous bitch," he growled. "You do it to me; you asked for it." He picked her up roughly and carried her over to the bed. But carefully, so that her head would not turn and her eyes would not see what lay on the other side. He threw her down across the bed and flung himself on top of her, enveloping her with his body and his burning kiss like a sex-hungry male who had not had a woman in a year, instead of a man who had left another woman's bed not fifteen minutes before.

Some of their clothes came off. There was not time for all.

He brutalized her, and she reveled in it. Passion flared quickly like a furnace in a foundry, and he stoked it with all the expertise at his command. In the back of his mind was a dull sense of shame in what he was doing, but at the same time he could not help knowing that she was loving every minute of it. She was like a wildcat in the mating season.

She gave a sudden little scream and arched her back. Her fingers dug savagely into his flesh and her body galvanized as if wild lightning raced through it. Nick's arms tightened about her. His fingers clutched her neck, seeking, finding, waiting, squeezing very gendy, holding on, so that he would not lose his place at the clash of final meeting.

Her legs tightened around his and she lurched triumphantly, hissing incoherent little phrases and clutching at him as if he were life itself. He let part of himself go. But the thinking part directed his fingers to the point of sensitivity in her sleek neck, and as she lost herself in rapture he squeezed as if he himself had lost his mind.

With one last gap she fell back beneath him, limp.

But her breathing was steady and her pulse was very much alive. She was out cold, that was all, a victim of the act of love ... and of the expert fingers of the man called Killmaster.

Nick rose quickly and put himself together. There was no knowing how long she would be unconscious, but he could count on several minutes at least.

A second gong sounded as he straightened out the creases in his clothes and flicked the small switch underneath his collar. He moved the dial to its four positions, listening carefully. From the workshop came a hum of subdued activity. From the laboratory, nothing. From Krutch's quarters, nothing. From Wiesner's, nothing. He twitched back the thick curtains that screened his window from the center of the camp. The guards were already out in double force, but so far as he could see there were none in the immediate vicinity of the open

outside door of the living quarters. And Ah Choy was scuttling toward the dining room.

He unlocked his door, peered out, heard nothing.

Lin Suy slept peacefully upon the rumpled bed. Her breathing was a little shallow, but that was to be expected.

Nick scooped up Wulff's deadweight and slung it over his shoulder.

Thirty seconds later he was inside Wulff's own living quarters, breathing a little more heavily than usual and listening for any sounds of outcry.

None came.

He worked as quickly as he could.

It took five minutes before he was satisfied with his arrangements with the body and his quick search of Wulff's belongings. He found nothing, but he left plenty to be found ... one body, half-naked, hanging from a shower rail, with a shower stool kicked away beneath it.

It took another minute before the Lockpicker's Special succeeded in locking and bolting Wulff's door from the outside and making it look as though Wulff must have done it himself from within.

Nick took a deep breath and wiped beads of sweat from his brow. He walked quickly down the richly carpeted corridor toward his own room—and froze as a shadow fell across the entrance of the building. It stayed there, unmoving, neither coming in nor going away.

An agonizing minute passed. He watched the shadow on the carpet, the patch of darkness in the hazy sunlight that streamed through the open door that he would have to pass, and wished to God that he could know which way the man was facing. But he couldn't look. At this stage he must not be seen. And so he waited.

Footsteps scrunched on the gravel outside. Chinese voices yabbled to each other in a dialect he knew very little of. But he caught snatches of it, and one phrase was—"Yes, but Lin Suy is with him." Then a grunt, and a comment that must have meant something like, "Oh, well, in that case," because the shadow moved and two sets of footsteps crunched away.

Nick sidled cautiously past the doorway, alert for the shadow's return. But there was no one near the door and the compound was silent in the sweltering heat of the day. Only the guards paced back and forth inexorably between the workshop, the laboratory, and the sunken entrance to the rocket area.

He padded quietly back to his room and unlocked the door. Lin Suy lay exactly as he'd left her—spreadeagled, half-naked, abandoned to sensuality—but the quality of her breathing was slightly changed and there were bright patches on her copper-olive cheeks. She was starting to recover her senses.

Nick quickly ripped off some of his clothes and disarrayed the rest. He was back in position before she stirred, his heart pounding at his will and his breath coming in little tearing gasps. One of his arms lay beneath her back, pressing her close to him; the other encircled her neck while his fingers massaged it gently. She stirred beneath him and gave a little fluttering sigh. He made his muscles twitch as if relaxing after some strenuous but ecstatic ordeal, and then he kissed her long and tenderly.

You heel, Carter, he told himself. What a nasty trick!

“Oooohhhh,” Lin Suy moaned. “I swoon, I die from love. You come to me, and everything goes black. It is like falling ... falling ... falling into space. Oh, you make me lose my senses!”

“No, really?” Nick said, gratified, and nibbled very gendy at one waiting breast before pulling himself away.

She caught at him. “No! I want your body close, close, close! I want you more than ever.”

“Then you are not satisfied,” Nick said sadly. “I did not please you, after all.”

“Foolish man!” She rubbed herself against him, and her eyes, he saw, were glowing with determined light. “It has never been like that for me before, not even last night. I want more, I want more, I want more!”

“But what about lunch?” Nick suggested hopefully. “We need our strength.”

“Later,” she said. “Later. Touch me.”

And she was ready to be touched again. Her perfect little nipples stood out like small beacons on twin hills, and her agile little body exuded warmth. The incredible part of it was that she soon made him ready, too, even after all the exercise.

Oh, very well then, he thought. One more for the road.

Lin Suy squirmed deliciously. For him it was better than the time before, for now the cold accusing corpse of Helmut Wulff was no longer lying only inches from their tangled bodies and now he did not have to squeeze her into brief oblivion.

Well, not the same kind, anyway.

“Goodnight, Ilse.”

“Goodnight, Erich.”

Nick smiled, closed the door, and locked it.

Eleven o'clock at night, the end of a perfect bust of a day. Sure, he'd had his entertainment, but he was as far away from the secret of the missile as ever.

He poured himself a drink and thought about the vault of Metaplast. This afternoon, after his belated lunch, he had found

Wiesner unaccountably more willing to accept his "help," so he had become a little better acquainted with both the workshop and the laboratory. Not that it was going to do him the slightest bit of good.

The vault containing the Metaplast was built into the far wall of the laboratory. Nick had looked at it with undisguised interest.

"How do you load it?" he had asked.

He may have imagined it, but he thought he saw the slightest trace of alarm flickering in Wiesner's eyes. Then it had vanished. "What do you mean, 'load it'?" Wiesner had asked easily.

"From here to the rocket," said Nick. "I can see only one access door and no provision for moving the stuff. And naturally one would move radioactive material with the greatest care."

Wiesner laughed. "But of course, the greatest. How do you know it is radioactive?"

Nick shrugged. "Lead and concrete as far as the eye can see and caution signs all over. I'm only making an assumption. Unscientific of me, I suppose, but in a project as sophisticated as this I wouldn't expect you to have T.N.T. stacked behind those doors." He tilted his head at the vast leaden panels and the two armed guards who stood impassively outside them.

"Well, you would be quite right," Wiesner said expansively. "The material is to a certain degree radioactive and we must be extremely careful. The vault is divided into two parts, you see. The entrance section is the control room—the usual battery of control switches and a tiny viewing window. The material of course is in the second section, and it is there that the mechanical arm will place it into the canister when all is ready. But you know about that procedure, of course." He eyed Nick curiously.

Nick nodded. "I've seen it done. That's why I wondered how you were going to do it, because I didn't realize the vault was in two parts. But that still doesn't explain how the canister gets to the rocket."

"Ah, no. It does not, does it? But there is, you see, a second access door. It is a sliding panel in the ceiling, activated by a combination of switches on the main control board. A crane, working from the outside, reaches in through the opening and deposits the canister in an insulated truck which will be waiting outside at the proper time. Then to the tunnel entrance and the elevator-gantry." Wiesner smiled. "It is all very simple, really. And absolutely accident-proof. For instance, there are three keys to the vault, and each must be used at the same time or it will not open. The controls, too, must be operated simultaneously by three people, and the sliding panel in the ceiling will not respond to stimulus until the crane-operators apply the proper code-operated key. So you see we are entirely secure."

"Yes, I see," said Nick. "That is reassuring." In other words, there

wasn't a way in the world he could get into that vault and see the Metaplast for himself. "I hope I will be permitted to watch die loading operation. It always fascinates me."

"I don't see why you shouldn't," Wiesner said. "Of course, that will depend on Krutch. He is one keyholder, I am another, and Dr. Wulff is the third. But we must all bow to Krutch's wishes." He made a little bow as he spoke and there was a thin thread of dislike in his voice.

No doubt we must, Nick thought to himself. But you just lost yourself one keyholder, chum.

He spent the rest of the afternoon with Wiesner in the workshop, supervising the construction of the triggering device. No one seemed to miss Dr. Helmet Wulff. And everywhere that Burgdorf went, someone else was sure to go. After dinner Use had gone with him to his room and they had talked. Just talked. He was immensely grateful for the rest. But she told him nothing that he needed to know, though he sensed in her a dislike not only for Krutch but for her stepfather as well.

So now at last he was alone in his room, fully aware that every corner of the place was stiff with guards on double alert and that for all the use his solitude was to him he might as well be chained up in the stockade.

Well, not quite.

He turned on his shower, undressed, and ducked quickly under the stinging spray. Then he left the water running while he wrapped himself in a towel and squatted on the shower stool to commune with his shirt collar.

The limpet mike in the workshop gave him a hum of subdued activity. The laboratory was silent but for the slowly pacing footsteps of the guards within. There was no sound at all from Dr. Wiesner's room.

But Krutch's room paid off in spades.

"... But it's appalling, just appalling!" Use whispered shakily.

"Never mind how appalling it is," Krutch roared. "When did you see him last? Where was he? How was he? Who was with him? And don't give me that tremolo, young woman. I know damn well you thought he was a cold fish, just as I did. So spare us the dramatics."

"Cold or hot, he's dead, and horribly," she said with spirit, "and you are disgusting to talk like that. Anyway, you're wrong about—"

"Just answer the questions!" Krutch bellowed. Nick listened, fascinated, almost seeing the bearded face mottling with rage.

"Use!" Wiesner murmured warningly.

"I was only going to say that you're wrong about him being cold," she said stiffly. "I last saw him from the main control room at about eleven this morning. He was on rocket gantry number two and he was

in a filthy mood. He refused to allow me to take Burgdorf down there and he said some—some terrible things. You may think he was cold but he was furious, mad with jealousy. You should not have told him what you wanted me to do with Burgdorf. He said—he said I was enjoying it too much.”

“Did he, now? And are you?” Krutch rumbled fruitily.

“I am only doing what you said I must,” she said, and her words were icicles.

Is that so? thought Nick, listening avidly. In the beginning, maybe. But you’ve started to enjoy it, sweetheart.

“And you left him when?”

“Shortly before lunch. I told you when I saw you.”

“And then Lin Suy was with him until he joined me in the laboratory,” Wiesner said softly. “Is that not so, Ah Choy?”

“That is so,” Ah Choy’s voice came through thinly. “He could have had only a few minutes at most. Not enough for all that was done. In any event, we must not forget that the door was both locked and bolted from within.”

“We don’t forget, you fool,” Krutch growled. “A simple enough trick for those who know how.”

“But time,” said Wiesner. “The time element. Let us go through this again....”

They did so.

“Impossible,” Wiesner said finally. “Someone else, then? I suppose we must interrogate each man in the place. But of course Helmut was the gloomy, arrogant kind, pride easily hurt, and you, Krutch, did not help when you smashed his hand. Also, he was extremely possessive about Ilse, as you know.”

“Bah! That kind of man does not kill himself. He would seek revenge, that one.”

“Revenge? Ah! That is an interesting notion, Krutch,” Wiesner said thoughtfully. “Perhaps that is exactly what he did. He must have known our suspicions would fall at once on Burgdorf.”

“Balderdash!” roared Krutch. “Absolute nonsense! You, Wiesner—Pah, what is that? I suppose another body has been discovered. Ah Choy, go to the door, you snail.”

In the dim distance Nick could hear a hammering on the door. Then it stopped, and for a moment all the voices were silent but for a mutter that must have come from the door.

Ah Choy’s flat tones hit the tiny mike as paper rustled faintly. “Radio message from Liu Chan,” he said, and there seemed to be a touch of triumph in his voice. “Paris verifies their previous communication and requests that we refrain from further contact with them until the job is done and Burgdorf reports back to them in

person. Here, see it for yourself.”

Nick's heart leapt exultantly. A-2 had come through for him in Paris! At best it meant the whole group was caught in AXE's trap; at least it meant that he was covered from the Paris end.

Paper rustled more loudly and Krutch grunted.

“All right, all right, all right!” he barked. “So Burgdorf's in the clear and Helmut killed himself. A neat and pretty picture. Get out, then, all of you—no, you stay here a minute, Wiesner. Ah Choy, you take Ilse to her room and see that she stays there. From now on I don't want anyone wandering about alone, you hear me? Not anyone! And then you can get rid of that fool's body before this stinking heats gets him. Get out, I tell you!”

There was a rustle of departure and then the clink of glasses.

“So, Wiesner,” Krutch's voice boomed. “We must be satisfied, I suppose. Ilse will have to operate the third key. You trust her, I suppose?”

“Infinitely,” Wiesner said. “She does everything I tell her. You must have noticed that. She knows as well as I do that if she obstructs me in the slightest way I will turn her over to the East German authorities for helping that young fool get through the Wall last year. Besides, she still thinks our work here is for the cause of peace. She is naive, a stupid girl, but she knows better than to disobey my orders.”

“The cause of peace!” Krutch chuckled hugely. “Ah, you are good, Wiesner. Now I have a piece of news for you. I have received confirmation from my man in Moscow. Countdown and weather permitting, Petrovsk I will be launched from Yaroslavl at eight o'clock on the morning of the fifth. If there is any delay they will make another attempt on the following Saturday. But delay should not concern us. If our planned orbit is correct—and you will see that it is—Spider will be ready to blast them from the sky. We must plan our launch for the night of the fourth or very early in the morning of the fifth so that the death belt will be waiting for them. You are quite sure that there are sufficient Metaplast balls for the counter-orbit?”

“Positive,” Wiesner said emphatically. “There will be no escape from them. Remember the speed at which they will be traveling. It will be as if the Petrovsk craft were peppered with a blast of buckshot—except that the effect will be infinitely more spectacular. More devastating even than a rain of meteorites. But if we are to be ready I had better check on the progress at the workshop. I have them working all night, as you know. I suppose you will require me to be escorted there by one of the guards?” His voice was touched with irony.

“Ho, ho, ho! No, that will not be necessary. There are guards every step of the way, as you will see. So you will find no opportunity for a

double cross, if that is what you hope.”

“Double cross? I don’t know what you mean,” Wiesner said icily. “But you had better not try planning one yourself. Remember that you need me.”

“Of course, of course!” Krutch roared heartily. “I am joking, my dear fellow.”

“I hope so.” Wiesner’s voice faded as he spoke. Nick heard the distant sound of a door opening and closing.

There was a brief silence and then the sound of liquid gurgling from a bottle. Uneven footsteps thumped heavily around the room.

“Need you!” Krutch’s big voice rumbled softly. “Need you, be damned! Men like you I buy in lots of dozens. Do without you too, you Chinese swine ... the whole fish-eyed bloody lot of you.” He muttered indistinguishably and ice cubes tinkled. Then he laughed. “Fool Wiesner! Stupid girl knows more than you do. Who needs you? We’ll see how this one goes. We’ll see. And then— pffft! Goodbye, Wiesner. Hello, girl. I’ll have the whole world in the palm of my hand. Ha! Ha ha ha ha ha! Millions for me. Millions. Billions! Or I blast you out of the skies. I, Krutch! Do I need the Chinese? No! The world can be mine. Mine, mine, mine, mine!”

His mutterings became an incomprehensible blur of half-formed words and sudden bellows of manic laughter. Nick listened until the muttering and thumping faded into Krutch’s bedroom, and then he tuned in to his other carefully placed mikes. Only the one in the workshop responded with sound, but it told him nothing but that men were working overtime.

Nick turned off his shower and padded to his single window. A guard paced back and forth outside. He slid quickly into his trousers and opened his bedroom door. There was another in the passage. The man swung around to stare at him.

“What you want?” he demanded harshly.

“Orderly,” said Nick. “I’m short of Scotch.”

“I am not messenger.”

“I know, friend. But they’re so hard to find these days. Here, have a cigar. Best from Havana.” He reached for one and gave it to the man.

The guard shifted at it. “I get orderly when I change guard,” he said. “Must always be someone out in passage now.”

“Very sensible,” said Nick. “Whenever you have time.” He closed the door. And there he was, sewed up even tighter in an even more impossible trap than before.

He listened to the inexorable pacing of the doubled force of guards. The fact was inescapable now—there would be no night ventures for AXE Agent N-3, and little opportunity for snooping

during the day. Anyway, snooping was not enough. He was going to have one chance, and one chance only, for the one move he could make. And that one move would have to wait for the one and only right time.

Nick poured himself the last of his Scotch and bent his mind to what he had heard and what he was going to have to do. And the more he thought of it the more he knew that there was only one thing he could do.

CHAPTER 11

TWO DOWN, TWO OUT, AND FORTY-EIGHT TO GO

"It is ingenious, Burgdorf, most ingenious," Wiesner said approvingly. "Your group has done well with this device. We will test tonight and load immediately afterwards."

"Tonight?" said Nick. Two days had passed rapidly and still he had learned nothing, although he had been at Wiesner's side for almost every waking hour that had not been taken up by Ilse or Lin Suy. Wulff's appalling end had scarcely been discussed. There had been too much to do for that. "Is that wise, do you think? The men have been working at such fever pitch that they could easily make a slip."

Wiesner smiled. "They would not dare. Krutch would have their heads, and they know it. Besides, he is in a hurry. But there will be a little celebration this evening, and then a brief rest period for all. After that we test, we load, we launch. Poof! It is over. We are in the money and we leave this godforsaken place."

"Yes, back to Paris," Nick said reflectively. "A courier on the homeward journey. And you still can't tell me what this is all about? After all, I've come to feel very close to the project and I have to admit I'm burning with curiosity. Is it really so unsafe to tell me something that has so much to do with my own work? I'm quite surprised at being kept so in the dark."

"You will not long be in the dark, my friend." Wiesner had become almost expansive during the past couple of days. "The next few days will tell the story. If all goes well—ah, what a victory! And not for Krutch; for us, the new freedom fighters, the new German underground. Tonight we will drink to the discomfiture of our enemies on both sides of the world and all who think to conquer space without us. They will be at our mercy, Burgdorf, completely at our mercy. And all because of a deadly ring of tiny little satellites." Wiesner laughed. "Yes, of course they will be deadly, Burgdorf. Why not tell you that? But I can say no more at present. We must wait and see what happens."

He glanced around with an oddly furtive air. The hum of machinery drowned out all their voices and surely theirs as well, but Wiesner had suddenly turned cautious. He lowered his voice and whispered so that Nick could barely hear. "It may be possible for you and me to work together in the future, without Krutch. I did not realize that the Paris group would send a man as highly qualified. I may have need of you. And I think, when I tell them why, they will be

glad to let me have your services. We can still work for the Chinese. But not through Krutch. I do not trust him. And I think perhaps you do not like him either."

A trap? Nick wondered quickly. He shrugged. "How is it possible to like the man? As for working with you, it would be a signal honor."

"Good. We will talk more later. After the blast-off and the—ah—impact. We can all relax a little while tonight, then test at eleven sharp."

Nick left him moments later. He had his date to make with Ilse, and a few final plans to take care of. It was most important that this evening of celebration be a notable success.

He crossed the yard and greeted the guards with a cheerful wave. They acknowledged his salutes. Not with enthusiasm, but at least with tolerance. One or two were almost friendly. They even accepted his cigars.

That was one good thing about the past couple of days. Information had been scarce, the girls had been a little less willing—change of instructions from upstairs, Nick reflected—and the secret of Metaplast was still sealed securely in the impenetrable vault. But at least Dr. Burgdorf had managed to ingratiate himself with the encampment personnel and gain the confidence of Wiesner.

A deadly ring of tiny satellites, he thought. Not only radioactive, but—What? Explosive, maybe? Ready to meet Petrovsk I, and maybe other spacecraft after it, with a blast "even more devastating than a rain of meteorites." And test time was eleven sharp tonight.

It was time for him to do the only thing he could do.

He left a request with an orderly for dinner for two in his room at seven and a message for Ilse to dine with him in celebration. Then he went to his room, locked himself in, and twisted his wristwatch on its flexible band so that the underside was uppermost. When the covering plate was removed there seemed to be another watch face underneath it. But this one told a special kind of time, and it only had one hand. Nick set it at One and pulled the winder out another notch until it clicked gently into place. It could stay in that position until he saw how things were shaping. In the meantime its steady message of rapid single beeps would go on sending out the Stand By call through the ultra high frequency wavelength used only by Detachment Q-40 ... if they were still alive after their own mission to receive the call.

The conventional face of his wristwatch told him that it was close to ten o'clock. He looked at Ilse, sitting beside him on the couch, and gently squeezed her knee. It was time to do something about her.

"Like it?" he said softly.

"Divine, Erich." Use smiled at him. "Sumptuous. It makes me think

what Paris must be like—with you. But you are drinking very little tonight. Cornel We are supposed to be celebrating.”

“We are,” he said, looking over the shambles of platters and glasses on the mobile table. Krutch’s chef had outdone himself. And Nick had been pleased to see that Use had eaten the same food as he with equal gusto. It made him feel secure, somehow. “But I’m also supposed to be working and I want to be sober for the test.”

“Ah, but what’s another drop of champagne? We can both take it. Please, one more glass each, and we will drink to our success. You wouldn’t deny me that small pleasure, would you, darling?” Her smile was ravishing, yet pleading at the same time.

“I wouldn’t deny you anything,” he said gallantly, and drew the bottle from the ice bucket. In the split second that he averted his eyes he sensed a tiny movement from her, but when he looked he saw that she was only fingering her crumpled napkin. Both glasses were quite empty, waiting for their refill.

He filled them in silence and raised his own to hers. “Success!” he said, and took a little sip. It was cool and it was good.

“To you, to us,” she murmured, and drank delicately, watching him with glowing eyes. “Soon it will be over.” She put her glass down suddenly and reached both hands toward him. “Kiss me, Erich,” she said intensely. “One kiss, for luck. You don’t know how much your presence here has meant to me.”

He reached out one arm and drew her to him. With the other he put his glass down on the table and surreptitiously covered it with his hand.

She came into his arms with what seemed like genuine longing, but there was the faintest pause in the movement of her right hand ... and as they joined in embrace he felt the light touch of that hand on his and something very tiny falling from it and rolling down his fingers onto the table top.

She stiffened in his encircling arm and caught her breath.

“You missed,” he said coldly, and pushed her away.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said breathily, but her face was very pale and her eyes were darting over the table top.

“It’s right here,” said Nick, picking up the tiny pill. He clamped one hand on her chin and his eyes bore into hers.

“And you do know what I mean. Don’t bother lying to me, Ilse. Who told you to do this?” His head swam suddenly, as though he had already drunk the doped champagne, but then it cleared. He tightened the pressure on her chin. “Answer me!”

“Take your hand away,” she said icily. “Karl told me to do it. He’s found out something about you. He doesn’t trust you any more. God knows I did, but he says you’re sabotaging our whole project and he

found out just in time. Oh, Erich!" Her face crumpled suddenly and her eyes filled with tears. "Say it isn't true, say that I can trust you."

"It's rather late for that," Nick said thickly. He seemed to be having trouble with his tongue and his eyelids wanted desperately to close. "Much too late," he added abruptly, and dropped the little pill into her glass. "When did you manage to slip the first one in my drink?"

"What does that matter? I did it. If you don't let me out of here I'll —"

"You won't," said Nick, fighting waves of drowsiness. "I've had one, now you have one. Fair's fair. And thank you for saving me the trouble. Just tell me this—why the second dose?"

"Because you didn't seem to be going under," she cried. "I had to make sure, I had to make sure!"

"That was a mistake," he said hoarsely. "Here, drink this. C'mon, drink it!" He thrust the glass against her lips and tilted back her head.

"No, I won't drink it. Take it away, you—"

"Drink it!" He forced her lips open. A little of the liquid trickled down her chin as she squirmed to free herself. "What's so frightening about a little nap? You afraid you won't wake up?" He tightened his grip on her and saw her eyes widen in fear. Must do this and get it done with, he told himself hazily. Got to throw up, get rid of it. But got to put her out of ... He caught suddenly, hearing his own words as if they were echoing back to him. "You afraid you won't wake up?" Something in his gut was burning and his eyelids were lead shutters. Not normal reaction, his mind told him. Not normal, with the burning.

"Not supposed to wake up, is that it?" he said roughly. "Not just a sleeping draft—a poison, right? Right?" He shook savagely. "So you and Karl would kill me, would you? Poison. Murdering bitch!"

"No!" She shook her head violently and stared up at him with huge, wild eyes. "Karl wouldn't, he wouldn't! It's just a sleeping draft!"

He gazed down at her, feeling ill and only half in command of his senses. One more twist of his wrist, one more tug at her hair, and he could have the contents of the glass pouring down her throat.

"Is it?" he said flatly. "Lucky you. Lucky I won't take the same chances with your life." Abruptly, he released his hold on her and flung the glass away. It rolled silently on the soft, thick carpet, its golden contents already spewed out like a rain of spittle. Else looked at it and then at Nick. Doubt, bewilderment and fear chased each other through her eyes.

"Nevertheless," said Nick, "you will have to take your little nap."

His bunched fist smashed against her temple.

He caught her as she toppled, and thrust her onto the couch. She was taken care of for a little while. In the meantime he had very

urgent business.

He drank straight from the coffeepot—lukewarm coffee, grounds and all. Then he stumbled to the little cubicle in the dressing room and threw up with all his might. When he had done all he could he staggered back to the littered table with a glass of warm water from the tap and poured in almost the entire contents of the salt cellar. Then back to the dressing room to swallow the solution and lose his guts again, and again and again.

He was shaken and trembling when it was over and the cold running water was splashing into his face, but his head was clear and his stomach was empty.

The girl was still out cold when he went back to her. He took a Triple X tablet—a combination universal antidote and pep pill—and swallowed it with the contents of the cream pitcher. It made him gag again, but this time he held it down.

Working quickly now, he stripped the sheets from his bed and ripped them into narrow lengths. Ilse moaned slightly as he gagged and bound her but her mind was still deep in the shadows and he had no difficulty in tying her and dumping her in the shower stall. If everything went according to plan he would be able to come back for her. If it didn't, he wouldn't, and that would be that. But at least one rocket would fail to take its deadly load of Metaplast into space. What would happen in the days and weeks to come was something else again. Forces could always be regrouped, new triggering devices developed, new plans made to cow the world into submission ...

Wilhelmina, Hugo and Pierre. Check. Binoculars unscrewed, tube into right-hand pocket. Check. Good supply of cigars, not the fine Havanas, but the others. Check.

He tuned in to the little receiver under his shirt collar.

Only one of his planted mikes gave back any sound at all, that of the slow pacing of the guards in the laboratory. Krutch's room and Wiesner's were silent. Fair enough; they may not be there. But the mike in the always humming workshop was absolutely dead.

Nick took a deep breath. So that was what Wiesner had discovered. And shared, no doubt, with Krutch. That probably meant the triggering device had already been tested, while he was letting himself be doped by Ilse. And it also meant his time had just about run out, before his work was done.

He stepped out into the silent corridor and locked his door behind him.

The guard loomed up ahead of him before he'd covered a yard. He was a thickset, brute-faced man, disliked even by his fellow guards.

"Where you go?" he grunted.

"Dr. Wiesner—where is he?" Nick rapped. "Miss Benz is ill. I must

see him.”

“In room. You stay here.”

“Look, this is urgent. I’ve got to see him right away. I tell you, the girl has taken sick.”

“You stay. I go. You. Get back in room.” A thick hand reached out and pushed against Nick’s chest. “I see you go.”

Nick glared at him. Then shrugged. “All right, but see you get Wiesner at once.”

He half-turned as if to go, but as he turned he flung his full weight forward on one foot and raised both hands together in a double axe-blade that chopped savagely at the thick neck just below the ear.

The man dropped like a felled ox.

Nick looked around quickly, listened, heard guards outside but no alarm, and dragged the fellow to the little sitting room across from his own room. It was, fortunately, deserted. He stowed the body behind a sofa, closed the door behind him, and headed for Wiesner’s rooms. This time he was not accosted. As he passed the doorway to the courtyard he heard music and shouts of laughter from the mess hall. He listened for a moment, taking out a cigarette and his lighter as he paused, and heard Krutch’s big voice boom out jovially.

So Krutch was still at his little celebration, and in a good mood too. Interesting.

Footsteps scrunched near the doorway and he ducked quickly past. Seconds later he was hammering at Wiesner’s door.

“Ja, ja, who is it? I have said I must not be disturbed!”

“Burgdorf,” Nick said urgently. “Something’s happened. I must see you.” He prepared a tense and worried look.

“Burgdorf!”

There was a slight pause. Then the door opened with a rattle of the lock and Wiesner stared out at him, one hand in his pocket.

“You,” he said flatly.

“Yes, of course. Why not?” Nick looked furtively around and pushed his way past Wiesner. “It’s Krutch,” he said. “I think.” He closed the door. The lamp on Wiesner’s desk splashed a pool of light on a big square of blue paper that looked like the plans for the triggering device.

“Krutch,” he said again. “I think he’s planning something. Some kind of double cross.” He kept his voice low, almost in a whisper. “I found a bugging device, a hidden microphone, in my room. There may be one in yours—be careful.” He saw Wiesner’s eyes flicker to the desk and he let his own eyes follow. “Going over the plans?” he whispered. “Has someone been tampering with the triggering mechanism?”

“I don’t know yet,” Wiesner said slowly. “That may be the answer. I almost hope it is. As for the thing you call a bugging device, I have

already found it. Also one in the workshop. That is why I at once ran my first tests on your triggering mechanism. And it does not work, my dear Burgdorf. I'm afraid it does not work. You think, then, that someone has been tampering with it, do you?" His hand seemed to tighten in his pocket.

"It may be nothing," Nick said rapidly. "Ordinarily I would say it's the normal problem of ironing out the last-minute kinks. But—under the circumstances I'm afraid I can't think that. That's not all that's happened." He stuck his cigarette nervously into his mouth. "By the way, have you said anything to Krutch?" He waited, lighter ready.

"Not yet," Wiesner said, and his eyes burned into Nick's. "I did not think it wise. You know his evil rages. In fact, I even thought I might have to arrange a little accident for him so that he remains in ignorance. Later, of course, I will be able to perfect the thing. Without him. Take his place, one might say, at the head of the hierarchy." He smiled, and now his handsome leonine head had a foxy look about it. "And don't think I trust you, my dear Burgdorf, with your glib words. Krutch is not given to such things as listening devices." His hand came out of his pocket. There was a gun in it, one very much like Helmut's.

Nick lit his cigarette. "Is he not?" he said coldly. "Then perhaps he was not the one, either, who caused doped champagne to be delivered to my room. Fortunately I wasn't drinking tonight. But Ilse was. And I'm afraid she is feeling very, very ill right now, although no doubt she will recover."

Wiesner gasped. "That's impossible! How could she—?"

"Just lucky, I guess," Nick murmured, and flicked the tiny trigger on the lighter. The dart sank almost instantaneously into Wiesner's neck, and in that same instant Nick's foot lashed out and up to kick the gun from Wiesner's hand. Wiesner's mouth opened wide in the beginnings of a scream. Nick snaked out two sinewy arms and clamped a hand over the gaping mouth.

"A moment's silence, if you please," he said pleasantly. "Then you'll have a nice long sleep. Like Ilse. Or perhaps not quite like Ilse. Tell me, was it poison? Is she likely to die if we don't pump her out? If so, kindly nod. But don't lie, or you'll die instead of sleeping."

Wiesner nodded vigorously and struggled. "Get to her," he mumbled. "Must get to her. Need her. ..."

Nick tightened his grip. "Too bad," he said. "So worry a little in your dreams." He held on inexorably, feeling Wiesner grow flaccid in his grasp, sweating a little himself at the thought of having come so very close to death by poison. It was not his favorite way to die.

Wiesner sagged suddenly, his breathing erratic and his face as pale as death. Nick waited for a moment to be sure his dart had taken full effect

It had.

He left Wiesner in his own closet in his own locked room.

Outside Wiesner's room he twisted his wristwatch on its band and cut the Stand By signal. Then he set the single hand at twelve and gently pulled the winder back a fraction of an inch until it clicked into transmitting position.

A repeating series of twelve rapid beeps would be picked up—he hoped—by the men in the green berets. After sixty seconds the hand on the dial would reach eleven, and eleven beeps would flash across the airways until their cycle was completed. And so on down to one, and then— zero hour.

He needed every second of the twelve minutes he had left

CHAPTER 12

NOW TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND COUNT TO THIRTY

There was a difference about the blue-lit courtyard on this night of celebration and high hopes. Men were actually standing about in knots, talking with animation. Some of them were drifting to the workshop area, but most of them were idling, waiting ... waiting for the results of a test that never would be made. The big mess hall throbbed with unaccustomed life. The guards were out in force, but they made no attempt to interfere with the standing or the strolling men. They only watched.

Nick ambled across the courtyard through the little shifting groups toward the mess hall and its sounds of jollity. No one stopped him, either. No reason why they should—as yet.

If his observations and headcounts of the last couple of days had been correct, a “double force” of guards meant half the entire complement. The rest spent all their time in the Off Duty room. Which was connected with the general mess hall.

A few of the technicians greeted him as he entered the big L-shaped building. But none of them thought it worthy of comment when he went into the latrines in the passage between the guardroom and the mess room, and none of them watched when he quietly came out and padded down a passage marked RESTRICTED TO MILITARY PERSONNEL. It branched sharply and led straight to a door labeled GUARDS—OFF DUTY.

He reached into his pocket and took out a little metal ball that was as deadly, in its own small way, as a ball of Metaplast. Then he hammered on the door and flung it open.

A circle of eyes stared at him from the great round table where a number of the men were playing a game that required piles of cards, square counters and round chips. This was in the forefront of the room. Behind it was another area of crowded bunks, half-filled with men, all in various stages of undress. They gazed at him, mouths open. A couple of them started to their feet. One man reached for his gunbelt.

Nick's own gaze swept the room as he bounded in, exuding jollity. It was windowless and cheerless, reeking of stale cigarette smoke and the staler scent of unwashed human bodies.

“Gendemen!” he caroled cheerfully, taking in the scene, “on this night, of all nights, we should celebrate together. Look, let me show you something I've discovered. If you can guess the secret of it I will

have a case of whisky or whatever you want sent here within five minutes. See!" He spoke in an odd, patronizing mixture of German and pidgin Chinese; and what he said was crap and wouldn't hold up for a minute. He knew it, but he didn't have much time himself.

"Pah, the German fool is drunk," one man said contemptuously.

"What is that he has?"

Eyes craned forward. Men came down from their bunks and gathered around the table as Nick proudly showed the small round shape in his hand.

"It is magic," he said ingenuously. "Look, I twist it, so—"

"You wait before you twist," a harsh voice said. Nick looked up and saw a gun pointing at his midriff. "What you do in here with that? You make trick with us?" The owner of the gun was scowling suspiciously.

"Yes, exactly," Nick said happily. "I'll make it vanish as you watch. Right from the palm of my hand! Then I'll bring it back and let you look at it close-up, and if you guess how it was done—a case of whisky for you!" He pushed up his sleeves, rolled the metal pellet around once between his hands, and opened his right palm. Light glinted off Pierre's glossy surface.

"So, what if it is tiny bomb and explodes right in our faces? That would be some trick, no? We vanish, then."

"Please!" said Nick, looking hurt. "I'll be holding it right in my hand. Would I blow myself up? But of course you're joking with me."

"Oh, he is a harmless fool," someone said in a Cantonese dialect that Nick knew well. "Gives out cigars and things, quite good ones. Let him do his idiotic trick. Think—a case of whisky!"

"Well, all right," the scowling one growled. "But everybody watch him very closely. You!" He switched to his stumbling German. "Make your trick."

"Good," Nick said jovially. "Now watch me very closely." Someone laughed raucously. "Eyes on the ball. Nothing up my sleeves, nothing in my other hand, no way of hiding anything. I will twist it once, triggering the vanishing device in a manner of speaking, and then we wait for a count of, let's say, thirty. At the end of that time it will disappear before your eyes. Is everybody ready?"

Grunts and nods and sceptical sounds.

"Here we go!" said Nick. "When I have made my pass, start your count and watch the ball." He twisted Pierre briskly and waved his hand once in the air above him, and he drew a long deep breath.

"One," said someone. "Two. Three. Four." A ragged chorus joined in. "It will melt, you will see," said a scrawny man with the face of a Mongol. "Or fall into dust. It must be some chemical thing they have put together in the laboratory." "... seven ... eight ..." "And then he

will put it together again? That is impossible.” “... ten ... eleven ... twelve ...” “It is something with mirrors. Look, does it not seem to you that it is getting smaller?”

Nick’s audience gathered tightly around him. All the men were down from the bunks now, and all the almond-shaped eyes were glued to the silvery pellet in Nick’s hand.

“Smaller? Garbage! It must be your eyes are shrinking.” “... nineteen ... twenty ... twenty-one ...” “See, there is a little hole in it. Perhaps it is some kind of acid working away inside.” “... twenty-five ... twenty-six ...” “What are you, a fool? Then it would eat away his hand as well.”

Nick placed a fatuous smile upon his face and turned it on the circle of watchers. You’ll never guess my little secret, his expression seemed to say.

“... Twenty-nine ... thirty... . Thirty! Aha! It is still—!”

The speaker slumped suddenly over the tabletop. He was not alone; he was not even the first. In the space of less than a couple of seconds the entire ring of seated men was draped face-down upon the tabletop. Those standing scarcely seemed to notice. They were too busy clutching at their neckbands and changing color in their faces.

“Air! Air! It’s that... ball... gas. ...” A gun wavered toward Nick and skidded to the floor as the speaker dropped. Faces stared at him, mouths twisted with death and hatred and sudden understanding, eyes terrified and bulging from their sockets. Arms waggled feebly like the fins of stranded fish, reaching for him, clawing at him, groping for holstered guns and carelessly discarded gunbelts.

Nick tossed Pierre into their midst and backed carefully away, still holding his breath and eying them cagily as if they were a bunch of wild tigers ready to leap. But they were finished, and he knew it. Ineffectual bodies wavered uselessly and crumpled to the floor. Gas hung heavy in the air; but Killmaster was the only man aware of it.

Pierre had done his deadly work.

Off-duty guards lay in a grotesque tangle across the big round table and across each other. Nick gave them thirty seconds more as he sidled to the door, still watching, waiting for them to complete the act of dying. Nothing moved, any more, but his own silent feet.

He had taken the key from the lock and his hand was on the doorknob when he heard the light footsteps pattering toward him down the passage. There was only one place they could possibly be heading—to the guards’ off-duty room. He cursed inside himself as he recognized them.

Lin Suy. Little Johnnie-on-the-spot, as usual.

Nick thought quickly as the pattering grew louder. Let her in and let her die while he went on holding his breath? No—no reason why

Pierre should get her too ... little sex-cat ... Ah Choy's stooge ... but still... . Bounce out, slam the door in her face, and cheerfully pocket the key? Hardly Only one alternative.

He slid the key back into the lock and turned it silently, scissoring his fingers over it when it clicked into place and holding his palm flat against the keyhole. The doorknob rattled almost at once and he heard a little exclamation. It rattled again. Lin Suy muttered to herself and knocked.

Pause. She waited. Nick waited. Almost two minutes since he had released Pierre. That left him another two minutes before he must have air, for he could hold his breath as long as any man alive. But no longer than two minutes more.

"Open!" Lin Suy called impatiently, and rapped more loudly. "Are you all asleep, you lazy dogs? Open the door at once." Pause.

"Open!" The rapping became a hammering. "Ho Chang, Ah Choy wants you immediately." Knock, knock.

Nick's heart seemed to sink a notch. Maybe he'd been wrong to play it this way. Any more of this hammering, and half the camp would be aroused. He thought quickly, beginning to feel the first strain on his lungs. He could unlock the door quietly, pounce on her as she came in, knock her out and leave her to die ... all the things he hadn't wanted to do. Absurd, to cavil at adding one more dead in this chamber of death, but a woman.... He had had to kill women before. Some were as vile as any man he'd ever known. But this one ... ?

Hammer, hammer. "What is the matter with all of you? Are you dead, are you drunk? Ho Chang!"

Would she never go away? Bang, bang!

Nick fingered the key and braced himself for the inevitable.

A Vietnamese curse ripped through the angry pounding. Lin Suy knew some very nasty words indeed. Nick grinned sadly. Poor little bitch.

The doorknob rattled again and Lin Suy muttered to herself.

Nick softly, very softly turned the key. His hand tightened on the knob.

There was silence outside. His muscles tautened.

Little feet pattered off down the hall away from him.

He almost took a deep breath out of sheer relief.

The footsteps died away. He waited for a few seconds more and then he quietly eased open the door.

The passage was empty. He stepped outside, closed and locked the door, and let his breath out in a long, low sigh. Now if she were lurking somewhere down that passage— He would cross that bridge when he came to it.

He walked quickly away from the room he had turned into a

morgue. His relief was like a draft of fresh air when he met no one in the passage. The sounds of partying still came from the mess room. They were muted, though, as if most of the celebrants had left. Ahead of him, going out of the building, he could hear Krutch's ungainly thomp-slap thomp-slap tread. He hung back, sliding a comb through his hair as though he had just emerged from the latrines. Krutch would have to be dealt with, but other things came first.

When he left the building there was only a scattering of technicians still in the mess room, talking quietly, still waiting. The others were apparently already at their test posts or resting in their own quarters, for there was hardly anyone in the yard besides the guards. Lin Suy was talking to one of them, he noted. Krutch was thumping into the workshop. The sound of his impatient bellowing rolled over the yard—"Where's that bloody Wiesner?" No one seemed to answer.

Nick took quick stock of the status quo as he paused to light a cigarette. His three major objectives all lay beyond the immediate gauntlet of guards, of which there were eight within view. There was the guardpost at the gate, the searchlight and anti-aircraft emplacement on a low mound a couple of hundred yards beyond the Off-Duty section of the mess room and accessible only by going around the building and past a couple of others, and a small, heavily barred building that served as the ammunition depot. These must be reached, and other areas as well, or the odds against Q-40's mop-up squad would be murderously heavy.

So, the gaundet first. One of the guards was already walking toward him with a questioning look on his face. Nick met him halfway, already reaching for his little present. One of the ninety-second variety.

"You not go for test?" the guard said. "If not test, you back to own room or the mess hall."

"Oh, I go for test," Nick said cheerfully. "Still a few minutes to spare. Please, have a cigar on me, in honor of the baby."

The guard stared uncomprehendingly. "What baby?"

Nick flashed an enthusiastic smile. "Why, the rocket, of course. Tonight's the night. Cigars all around, to celebrate. Be my guest." He made a small mock bow and reached the cigar out with a flourish. But he did not pinch its tip until he was sure the man would take it. "A very special cigar," Nick added. "To be smoked when you're off-duty."

The guard's face split into a gap-toothed grin. Spatulate fingers accepted the cigar. Nick pinched quickly at the tip and released his parting gift. "Smoke it in good health," he said graciously.

"Tank you, tank you," said the guard, sniffing it appreciatively. "Your cigars, they velly good."

“Plenty to go around,” Nick said generously. He gave a little salute and trotted off to meet the next one.

“Cigar,” he said, with his gracious gesture and a smile. The guard’s face became slightly less inscrutable and he pocketed it gladly. Krutch was still roaring in the workshop. “Somebody go and get that Wiesner, will you? And Burgdorf too, while you’re about it.” “Tank,” said the guard.

Nick glanced back at the guard who had been talking to Lin Suy. Lin Suy was no longer with him. He wondered where she was, but it did not really matter any more. It was seven minutes to zero hour, and much less than that for some.

Lin Suy’s feet twinkled busily as she hurried to Ah Choy’s room. Her mind, too, was more than usually busy. That Burgdorf—it was saying to her—was not at the party. But he had come out from that door. Where had he been, then? In the Off Duty room, perhaps? It did not seem likely, not at all. And yet... . Ah Choy had sent her to that room before, on errands for him. Never had the door been locked. Never had the room been silent. The silence, that was it. Not even a snore. She had been angry before, but now she was worried. No, she was afraid. Ah Choy had not trusted Burgdorf, had he? He had not. And now something very strange had happened in that room. She was suddenly very sure of that.

She burst into his room. He started up from the big bed they had shared so often and stared at her.

“Ah Choy! The Off Duty room is locked, they do not answer. Arm yourself! Spread alarm! Burgdorf was in there, I am sine of that. You must find out quickly what is wrong.”

“What are you babbling about, Lin Suy?” But even as he spoke, Ah Choy was strapping on his shoulder holster and reaching for the intercom. “Tell me quickly, clearly!”

The grace with which the gift was given and the joy with which it was received must have made the grim reaper smile indeed.

“Don’t mention it,” Nick said grandly, and hurried on to the next. Three more to go. Thank God two of them were together near the workshop. They had been watching him, and they had been waiting for their gift. “Cigars,” he said, with his radiant smile and his quick pinch at the tips. His victims took them eagerly.

“Burgdorf!” It was one of the men who had worked on the triggering device. “What the hell are you dawdling about for? Krutch’s screaming for action. Where’s Wiesner, for Chrissake?”

“In the mess hall, no doubt,” Nick said over his shoulder as he hurried toward the eighth guard in the gauntlet. “I’ll be with you in a minute—less.” From one of the buildings he heard the sound of a

ringing buzz. Intercom phone, he thought. It went on ringing. "Cigar," he said pleasantly, pinching the tip. "To celebrate. But there are more of you on guard tonight, yes? Perhaps you will escort me to the others—to make sure I do not wander out of bounds?" He grinned cheerfully, but anxiety was gnawing at him. He had perhaps fifteen, twenty seconds before the first of his deadly messages made their point. The guard waved him away. "Go," he said. "I watch from here. You not back in one minute—pow!" He grinned with hideous cheerfulness and struck his gun butt zestfully.

"Oh, absolutely," Nick murmured, and went off with his loping stride. His sixty-second variety sat cosily in several guardsmen's pockets.

Another phone began to ring.

"Halt!" There were two men on the far side of the mess hall. Two guns pointed unwaveringly at his stomach. "You not come this way."

"Ah, but I have permission," Nick said happily, and pinched two of his thirty-second grenades before handing them over. "Gentlemen—for you, very special cigars for a very special occasion." He knew they did not understand all his words, but he knew they understood his meaning. One smiled thinly and bit the end of his cigar. The other beamed with joy, sniffed it, and thrust it into his pocket.

The telephone went on ringing.

The first recipient of the gift cigars stomped toward the telephone. His hand was reaching for the receiver in its wall slot outside the mess hall when the sound blasted the quiet night air to shreds. Then his hand was no longer reaching, for it had fallen off his body. But that did not really matter, for with the hideous, gaping hole through his shattered chest the guard would have no further use for arms ... even if his head had not been rolling rapidly away from him.

There was a stunned silence, a beat of stillness before realization dawned. Then another man blew up, and others shouted as the paralysis of surprise fell away from them.

"What was that?" Nick cried, the very picture of a timid German scholar. "My God, not the rocket?"

But they were running from him, each with both hands tight around their submachine guns and rushing forward as though leading a bayonet charge. Nick took off behind them like a bullet from a gun, racing for the little group of wooden storehouses which were about the only places on the lot to be free of the constant heavy guard. Two more grenades belched thunderously as he ran and skidded to a stop between the sheds. Pounding feet seemed to come from all directions, but no one came toward him. Wilhelmina slipped cosily into his hand

as he flattened himself against a wall. To his right, if he squinted cautiously between the storehouses, he could see the anti-aircraft emplacement and—beyond it—the ammunition depot. To his left he could see the radio shack and catch a glimpse of the entrance to the rocket center.

The guard outside the radio shack had swung around and was racing toward the sounds of explosion. How long is it going to take them to catch on? Nick thought, and shot the man point blank as he angled, unseeing, past him. Pretty soon the men were going to start getting rid of their gift cigars. But they'd better pitch them hard and far, for they were hell in tiny packages, monstrously lethal.

Another grenade blasted raucously, and then another. There was a great deal of shouting now, and a lot of running footsteps. Nick ducked from one storehouse wall to another, looking rapidly from left to right for any signs of movement or discovery. So far, so good. There was movement, but it all seemed to flow toward the work area where he had left his little killers. The two guards outside the entrance to the rocket center were staring around wildly and edging away from their posts. That was wrong of them. Nick sighted and squeezed Wilhelmina lovingly.

"It is the cigars! It is the cigars!" A guard outside the workshop screamed and flung the thing away from him. It hit a running man full in the chest and roared triumphantly, showering bloody bits and pieces over the yard. Two other men stopped in their tracks, eyes bright with panic, and reached into their pockets. They disintegrated loudly where they stood. The yard was pitted with holes and strewn with mutilated shapes. Smoke and smell drifted through the air. Death, in the form of a cigar flung aside in terror, flew through the open workshop door and ate its way through a bank of complex machinery. Splinters of hot glass and searing steel sprayed across the width of the big room. A small fire started at the point of impact.

Less than five minutes to zero. Nick dodged a rain of bullets from the remaining guard at the rocket center, crouched down low, and pumped back vigorously. His target cried out and dropped in a twisted heap. But now there were loud shouts from the ack-ack battery behind Nick. He pivoted briskly and dodged around the far side of a storehouse, sliding Wilhelmina back into her holster and pulling out several other weapons.

Ah Choy's master key turned and the door swung open at his kick. He stared into the room of death and gave a bellow of rage and fear. From outside he could hear the screams of those who were about to

die, but these inside were long past screaming. Ah Choy cursed. There would be no help forthcoming from anywhere. But it could only be one man who was doing all this. One man! He slammed the door to the guardroom and slid back a panel in the wall outside it. His thin yellow fingers prodded a red button. If one man could not be searched out and destroyed like the mad dog that he was ... !

The general alarm siren swelled through the bowels of the camp.

Nick heard it as he dodged around the storehouse, felt its vibrations trembling through the earth beneath his feet. He had two pursuers now. They had split up and were closing in on him in a pincer movement that would have him running full-tilt into one of them at any moment or backing up into the arms of the other. But to break away here would be to run directly toward the guardhouse at the gate. And that would be inconvenient, to say the least.

Ah Choy's thin voice piped out over a loudspeaker.

"General alert! General alert! All personnel to be on lookout for Dr. Erich Burgdorf. Spread out and search. Shoot to kill. Maneuver B. Do not—repeat—do not accept cigars. Do not enter Off Duty room. Search and destroy."

Nick wondered about Maneuver B as he headed rapidly for the corner of the storehouse.

But the rest of the message was clear, and so were the footsteps that were running toward him from around the corner and the ones that were gaining on him from behind.

CHAPTER 13

YOU BURN ME UP!

He was squeezing the trigger of the lone binocular tube even as he ran.

The searing beam of the disguised laser pistol pierced hody through the pale blue night, ready to eat the heart out of anything that came into its path. Nick skidded around the corner, pistol blazing at chest height. He had a fleeting vision of a thickset, helmeted man coming at him with submachine gun raised to fire, and then the man was lying sprawled out backwards with a look of shocked incredulity upon his face and a hole clean through his chest. A little wisp of smoke curled from his seared uniform. Nick leapt over him and swung around to face the other in a low crouch, pistol raised high but beam momentarily turned off.

The man who had been behind him rounded the corner cautiously but not cautiously enough. His gun spat once and its bullet plowed a furrow along the wall beside Nick's head. The laser poured its thin carnivorous tongue high across the fallen body, straight into the other man's face. The face became a hideous, eroded mask of death; the man became a dead man, falling.

Nick pinched the two cigars in his other hand, pivoted, and threw them with all his might at the gun emplacement and the frond-covered barrel that pointed at the sky. Then again he turned, scooped up one man's helmet and crammed it on his head, and took off his own pants. In a matter of seconds he had ripped the uniform from the other's body and was buttoning it around him when the gun emplacement came apart at the seams and sent a shattering roar into the night. He grabbed a submachine gun and raced toward the explosion. And passed it on the run, his gun blazing at the two guards who had left their post outside the ammunition depot to see what was happening at the gun emplacement.

Three minutes to zero hour.

The guards fell at the savage, unexpected burst of fire, directed at them by one whose helmet-hidden face they recognized only as they died.

"Idiots! Fools! Incompetents!" Krutch's voice bellowed across the yard as his mismatched legs thomp-slapped across the churned-up gravel. "Get back to your posts. Get back at once. Ah Choy, you bloody blind swine, rescind Maneuver B and get these fools of yours

back to their places!”

“I give the orders to the men,” Ah Choy said icily. “And I want every available man searching for the criminal. Or do you expect them to wait for him to come and pick them off?”

“Pick them off!” Krutch’s bearded face was twisted with rage. “What are they, sitting ducks, or yellow-bellied cowards like you? Don’t you realize, you Chinese pig, that if they leave their posts they make things twice as easy for him? By God, with you in charge of Security it’s no wonder we’re in this filthy mess. Get them back where they belong!”

“But—”

“You give the order or I will!” Krutch’s vast and meaty hand slammed against Ah Choy’s head and sent him reeling sideways.

Ah Choy recovered his balance and went scurrying back to his command post

Nick muttered impatiently beneath his breath. “Come on you, come on,” he grumbled. The laser’s blazing beam slowly—much too slowly—chewed a path around the lock. Metal hissed and sizzled as it melted. So! It was done. Nick finished the job with a prolonged burst of fire from the machine gun and kicked in the door to the ammunition stores. He kept firing as he pinched the last two of his grenades and tossed them far back into the stacks of weapons and explosives, and when he had used up his round of fire he dropped the gun and turned the laser pistol’s 10,000-watt ray onto a pile of crates. Flames began to lick their edges. He turned and ran. The grenades went off simultaneously three seconds later.

He kept his head down and galloped energetically toward the guard post at the front gate. Men milled past him, only yards away, shouting in confusion, but they were not looking at their comrades’ faces. They were hunting for a scientist gone berserk.

There was only one man left at the great gates to the camp and two more trying to get in from the outside. Nick swung up the laser pistol.

One down. Two down. Three—the third man loosed a burst of fire through the wire-crossed gates. Nick zigzagged away like a rabbit prancing over a bed of hot coals and turned the beam full-force toward the man. There was a scream of agony and then a sudden silence from the sentry, but his gun kept up a steady stream of fire. From somewhere near the main living quarters a gun began to fire back—at the dead man’s gun.

Nick kept his head down low and ran toward the rocket center. From the lab, from the offices, from the patrol stations around the encircling fence, from the rocket center itself, men began to emerge

like worms crawling out of the woodwork. The ammunition depot was making noises like a Fourth of July celebration in the heart of hell. In a brief lull between the tearing bursts Nick heard a low, familiar, chopping hum, and Ah Choy's voice screaming out over the loudspeaker, "Rescind Maneuver B! Rescind Maneuver B! Get back to your posts! Get back to your posts. Fire Squad, to the ammunition depot, fire squad, to the—"

A gigantic explosion ripped and roared through the entire compound. Some of the guards scattered; some hesitated and turned back toward their posts.

So that was Maneuver B. All hands on deck! But those who had just emerged from the rocket center were still hesitating, still only half-turned toward Nick.

He sidled behind them and raced down a flight of concrete stairs away from them. Someone shouted. Bullets clanged into a metal railing yards ahead of him. He flung himself down a concrete ramp and onto a catwalk leading past the base of the great, gleaming rocket.

Zero plus one.

He kept on running. There was nothing he could do to the rocket itself—it was much too vast for the puny weapons at hand—and nothing that he needed to do to it. Chaos and death had been his main objective, and he reckoned he had created a fair amount of that. To blast his way into a vault of radioactive and possibly explosive Metaplast to reveal its secret was the last thing in the world he intended doing; that was the one way to almost certain ignorance by annihilation, or vice versa. The nature of the operation was, by now, ominously clear—worldwide terror and domination, or international blackmail at least—by a group of Germans under the aegis of the Chinese and their stooges, Krutch and Wiesner. Although Krutch and Wiesner were rather balky stooges, and not exactly devoted to each other, either. Ilse, though—

Shots zapped past his ear. He glanced back and saw two men running along a catwalk at right angles to him, their guns blazing. He raced for an iron ladder leading to a higher catwalk and scrambled to the top. Something stung his leg. But the running figures were still too far behind him for effective fire. He ducked behind a thick metal shaft and peered down. The two men were still running, but no longer toward him. They were diving for a metal cage at the junction of the two catwalks, and they reached it as he aimed. He had time enough to see that one was a guard and the other was Ah Choy, but no time to fire before they were inside and shielded by its walls. It began rising rapidly. Soon it would reach a walled platform high above him, and from there they could look down on him and pick him off at leisure.

He triggered the laser pistol and turned its beam high upon the

double length of cable that drew the elevator upward. The searing heat bit savagely into its thick strands, but with what seemed to Nick like agonizing slowness. The cage was almost at the top. He wasn't going to make it.

The cable parted suddenly and whiplashed through space and the cage plunged downward. There were twin yells of ear-splitting terror, and then one shape hurled itself from the catapulting cage and clawed desperately at the catwalk rail. The other went on screaming until the sound was drowned out in the greater, jarring sound as the cage hit bottom.

Ah Choy was crawling along the catwalk. Miraculously, he was still alive. Miraculously, he was still clinging to his gun. It wavered in his hand but it was trying to seek out Nick; Ah Choy's eyes flickered through the pain-distorted mask of his face. Nick glided out from behind the metal shaft.

"Drop it, Ah Choy," he called. "Better to live and—"

But Ah Choy didn't seem to think it would be. His gun spat wildly and as it spat he called upon his Chinese gods and guards for instant help. Nick ducked and scudded sideways, triggering the beam and aiming it at Ah Choy's outstretched arm. Ah Choy's gun barked again, but only once. It was Ah Choy's turn to scream. He did so briefly, then he died.

Nick vaulted from his perch down to the lower catwalk. Sticky warmth was trickling down his leg and he ran with unaccustomed clumsiness, but still he ran. There was one more thing he could do, had to do, and that was to destroy the nerve center of this operation so that when all the tumult and the shouting died there would be something less than a ready-made rocket firing system waiting for a new horde of suborned scientists and their Chinese paymasters. He could not count on the men of the green berets to do that for him; theirs was a hit, mop-up and run operation, and this was his job anyway.

He ran from the catwalk to a stairway to a sloping tunnel. And dodged back hurriedly behind a circular tank as booted feet thundered toward him. He saw the men as they passed him, heading for the main missile room. They were the two guards from the control room passage. Good! Nick fingered the laser trigger. But in spite of all the killings of the night he could not make himself shoot them in the back. His cigarette lighter slipped into his ready fingers and he flicked once—twice—and saw two hands slap at their respective necks. He was down the passage before they turned. It would not matter if they followed him. They would fall on their faces in the passage.

Zero minus two.

Why was it so quiet? Must be because he was so far underground

that all sounds from above were deadened.

Footfalls galloped after him. He flung himself against the control room door with laser beam and Wilhelmina eating into it. There was a shout—a shot that clanged into his borrowed helmet and sent it flying—a second shot that bit into concrete behind his head—and then two thuds. Nick hurtled into the control room and raced toward the vast panel of switches at the far end. There were no more footsteps behind him.

The hungry beam played over the main bank of switches... chewing, spitting, eating. Nick held it in his right hand like an acetylene torch while with his left he clawed at knobs and handles, slid back metal covering plates, ripped out wires.

He worked in a near silence, broken only by the sizzling of melting metal and the tearing sounds of months of deadly work coming apart under his hands ... and the distant crump-boom of explosives high above him, out there in the night. Q-40 had started to mop up.

He worked savagely, ferociously, spewing heat into the heart of the control machinery and ripping out its guts until the room stank and smoke fumes curled across it.

Then there was another sound, a little hissing sound that penetrated the distant thundering and the noises of his own making, and it did not belong there in the room. He swung to face it—

One split second late. There was an opening in the wall that had not been there before—a sliding panel, his mind told him as a gun spat quickly, twice, and searing pains ripped simultaneously through his hand and shoulder—and the vast bulk of Krutch filled it from side to side. But Krutch was not just standing there. He was moving with incredible agility and his gun was spitting death. The laser beam raked past him, once, and then nose-dived to the floor. Nick heard Krutch's deep-throated chuckle as agony ripped through his head and red darkness swirled around him. The echo of the shots reverberated through the dark corridors of his mind. Then there was black silence.

He was hot, very hot, and he could not understand it. And someone kept saying Ha ha ha, ho ho ho, and he could not understand this either. He lay there with his eyes closed, feeling the sticky warmth trickling from his body and the dry heat rising around him, and trying to remember. Memory crawled back as the Ho ho ho turned into an incoherent ramble of speech, and the ramble became a string of words that made an awful sort of sense.

“So you are stirring, hey? You treacherous pig! My aim is good, is that not so! Ha! You live so that I may kill you slowly, do you understand that? He died of the heat, that's what they will say. Ho, ho, ho! He died of the heat, because he interfered with Krutch. I

would have had the whole world in my hands—the whole world in my hands—if it had not been for you. Belts of death throughout the skies to meet every spacecraft blasted off from earth—Russian, American, the lot of them. The agony of it! The beauty of it! And who would have known what was happening to them until I, Krutch, let them know? Hey? And then, my friend, a blackmail scheme that would have thrilled the heart of Hitler. Who needed the Chinese? Who needed Wiesner? Only until the first job was done, and then it would have been mine, all mine. But then you had to come along and spoil it.”

The bellowing voice was suddenly querulous. “You had to spoil it! Open your eyes, you pig. Open!” A foot lashed out at Nick’s prone body, a foot with the weight of an enormous artificial leg. Nick groaned involuntarily and his eyelids fluttered open before he could control them. Krutch’s face loomed above him, gigantic, distorted, filling the screen of his vision. And the face smiled through the tufts of bristling red beard. “So you are with me?” the big voice rumbled. “Good. Then you can enjoy our little game. It cannot last too long, to be sure. But long enough for you to suffer. Ah, but that is not the same as enjoying, is it? Never mind. I will enjoy. And then I will go back the way I came and wait for your little disturbance to blow over, and then leave. Leave! Leave, and live, and start again. But you, you will not live. Do you see what I am doing, Burgdorf? Do you see? Look!”

Nick looked. But there was no need for him to look. He felt it first, and then he saw it. Heat seared through his clothes and bit a tiny fragment off his leg. Smoke and the stench of burning cloth rose ceilingward. And Ulric Krutch laughed heartily. “It is like a knifethrower at a circus sideshow,” he chortled. “Except that I am using your clever little light beam. Such a hot light beam.” He chuckled. The beam traced a path between Nick’s out-flung legs ... up his side ... past his shoulder ... around his head. He could smell the singeing of his hair, feel the heat that licked at the sprawling outline of his body, hear the evil chuckling of a man driven mad by last-minute failure. “You see how it is,” Krutch giggled fruitily. “Close, close, close, like the circus knifethrower. But then, at the end, unlike the knifethrower... . Ah, but the end is not quite yet. We must prolong the game for full enjoyment, must we not? Perhaps you can even delude yourself that you will escape me. Think of it. Think! How will you escape me?”

Nick thought. Sweat and blood trickled to the floor. Heat-seared concrete burned beside him and wisps of smoke curled idly along the surface of his clothes. Krutch leered down at him as the beam traced a lazy path around the edges of Nick’s body. “Mustn’t move,” Krutch crooned with hideous jollity. “Think! Tell yourself that you can

bargain with me and I will relent. But mustn't move! Then there will be no bargaining ... only burning flesh. First an arm, then a leg, then ... we will see what next. Ho, ho, ho, ho! I have not enjoyed myself so much in years!"

Not since you were a kid pulling off the wings from butterflies, Nick thought, testing out his aching muscles one by one and ransacking his mind for inspiration, for any way out of this. But there was no way. One kick, even, and Krutch would pin him with the beam like a butterfly to a board.

His eyes darted around the ruined control room. There was no hope; no hope at all. Then his heart jumped as he saw something that Krutch could not see because it was behind him and his whole attention was focussed on Nick.

There was one small hope. The door of the control room was swinging slowly inward.

Nick gave a sudden little moan and let his head slump sideways. Then he expelled his breath in one slow sigh. And stopped his breathing. Heat licked at his feet.

"What, what?" Krutch roared. "Come back, you! Come back here! You don't escape by dying in your own way. No!"

Fetid breath brushed across Nick's face and Krutch's free hand slammed across it. "Wake up, wake up!" Krutch bellowed. For a moment—for one single, dreamed-of, precious moment—the breathy sizzle of the hungry heat beam stopped. Nick lashed out suddenly with both hands clawing for Krutch's right, grabbing desperately for the pistol and turning it away from him with a savage strength born of his certain knowledge that this was his only chance. Krutch bellowed like a gorilla and kicked out viciously with his wooden leg.

Nick grunted, almost relaxed his grip, but held on frantically. Krutch's huge hands bent his wrists back ... back and back and back until the wide mouth of the pistol was pointing only inches past his head. He rolled suddenly, still straining with all his might to thrust the thing away from him, kicking and lurching with his lower body like a wild horse at a rodeo.

Something man-shaped, man-sized leapt through the air and landed heavily on Krutch. The double weight thrust Nick hard against the floor and he fell back with a wheeze as his breath went out of him. The pistol clattered to the floor and Krutch's great body reared back while the thick throat gave a gargling scream. And the body fell, again, on top of him.

Nick fought for breath and pushed the weight away. The weight eased suddenly as a helping hand reached down and pulled aside the enormous, bleeding body. Krutch rolled over with a thud, death's snarl upon his face.

Sergeant Ben Taggart of Q-40 sheathed his commando knife and reached out both hands to help Nick to his feet.

"What you might call in the nick of time, huh, friend?" he said cheerfully.

"On the double, on the double! You got one hour to go and if you got any sense in your thick heads you'll get the living hell away from here!"

Nick grinned wearily as he heard Captain Marty Rogers' half Russian, half pig-German orders. The helicopter waiting in the shattered yard was unmarked; the green berets were absent and their owners clad in the most nondescript of khaki; the figures darting through the mess of smoke and flame gave their crisp commands in every language but their native American. If the technicians who were now streaming toward the main gate and out into the dark Vietnamese night ever found anyone to report to, they would not be able to say with any certainty just who had attacked them. But they would be spared the blast that would take place one hour from now, the massive charge laid in the laboratory for the destruction of the Metaplast ... whatever it might be.

"In you go," said Nick. He prodded Ilse lightly from the rear, admiring, as always, the neat swing of her delectable behind. Hands reached out to pull her into the helicopter. Wiesner was already aboard, deep in his own world of sleep. So was Lin Suy; but she was wide awake and kicking against the bonds that tied her.

"Man, this one is a wildcat," Taggart said admiringly. His eyes glided over Ilse, taking in her anger, her disheveled hair, the flush of her face, her wonderfully proportioned figure. "Ah, the German lady," he said sadly. "Reckon she turned out the bitch I was afraid she'd be. Am I right?"

"Time will tell," said Nick. "But I think you may be wrong. I think we'll find that step-papa misled her, and beneath it all she has a heart of gold." Ilse gave him an odd look of fear and anger mixed with relief.

"That's what I like to hear!" said Taggart, his broad face beaming happily. He switched suddenly to his excellent Russian. "Come on, comrades," he bawled. "Let's get out of here before the Viets get onto our tails. All aboard! All aboard!"

They were in the air a minute later, pulling away from the doomed encampment in the big transport helicopter, looking down on a shambles of death and smoke and flame. Q-40's mop-up had been quick and thorough.

Helicopter blades churned through the night.

Ilse looked at Nick. "Many people were killed tonight," she said

flatly. "Why did you spare me and Karl? And Lin Suy?"

Nick gazed back at her, drinking in her flushed, blonde beauty.

"Several reasons," he said. "One, we need information, and between the three of you, you have it. Especially you. And two, because I don't believe that you, at least, understood what it was all about. Other reasons can come later."

"There will be no later," she said quietly. "I have nothing to say to you, or anyone."

"Yes, you have," Nick said, just as quietly. "You will tell us everything we want to know, about Metaplast and how it works and how you got involved in this. And you'll be glad when it's all over." He smiled at her suddenly, tired and wounded though he was. And through the roar of the motor he murmured, "You may even let me make love to you again."

"No!" she said hody. "Never, never, never, never!"

"Yes!" she said hotly. "Now, now, now, now!" Her lips burned against his mouth.

New York was balmy in the spring. It was a night for love, and he was making it. There had been much talk, and now it was all over. She was in his bed and in his arms. Vietnam was very far away. She knew, now, how cruelly her scientific knowledge and her innocence had been abused. But it no longer mattered. She had lost her innocence, in many different ways. Nick was teaching her some new ones.

"Now!" she breathed again.

Now was so much better than Never. And it could also last a long, long time.

Nick made it last ... a very long, long time.